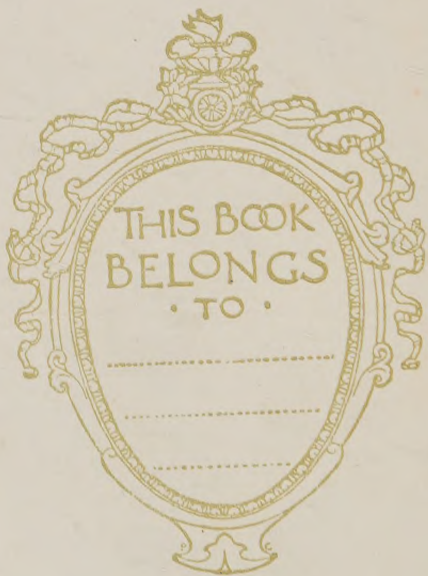
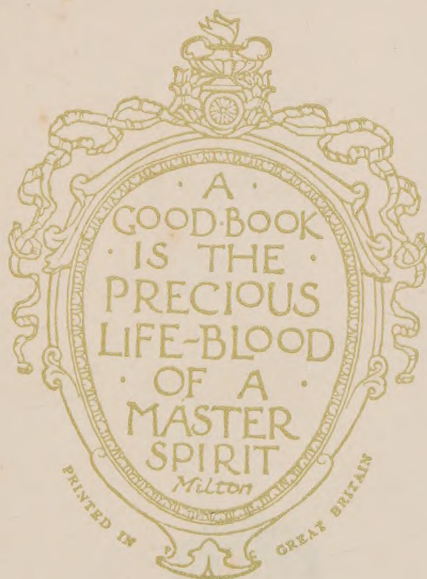










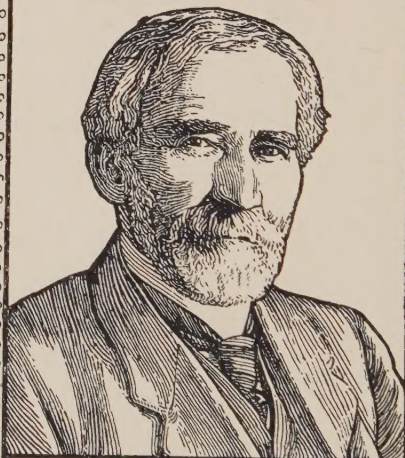
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W.H. HUDSON

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BIRDS  
IN A  
VILLAGE



BY  
W.H. HUDSON

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# CONTENTS

|                                                                           | PAGE |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| BIRDS IN A VILLAGE . . . . .                                              | 7    |
| QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS . . . . .                                       | 155  |
| THE COMPLEAT ANGLER . . . . .                                             | 165  |
| POEMS OF BIRDS . . . . .                                                  | 171  |
| MUSIC'S DUEL . . . . . <i>Richard Crashaw</i>                             | 173  |
| TO A SKYLARK. . . . . <i>P. B. Shelley</i>                                | 178  |
| BIRD OF THE WILDERNESS <i>James Hogg</i> . . .                            | 182  |
| TO A SKYLARK. . . . . <i>William Wordsworth</i>                           | 183  |
| THE GREEN LINNET . . . . . <i>William Wordsworth</i>                      | 184  |
| " O NIGHTINGALE! THOU<br>SURELY ART " . . . . . <i>William Wordsworth</i> | 185  |
| TO THE CUCKOO . . . . . <i>William Wordsworth</i>                         | 186  |
| THE LARK . . . . . <i>William Blake</i>                                   | 188  |





## BIRDS IN A VILLAGE

### I

ABOUT the middle of last May, after a rough and cold period, there came a spell of brilliant weather, reviving in me the old spring feeling, the passion for wild nature, the desire for the companionship of birds; and I betook myself to St. James's Park for the sake of such satisfaction as may be had from watching and feeding the fowls, wild and semi-wild, found gathered at that favoured spot.

I was glad to observe a couple of those new colonists of the ornamental water, the dabchicks, and to renew my acquaintance with the familiar, long-established moorhens. One of them was engaged in building its nest in an elm-tree growing

at the water's edge. I saw it make two journeys with large wisps of dry grass in its beak, running up the rough, slanting trunk to a height of sixteen to seventeen feet, and disappearing within the "brushwood sheaf"<sup>1</sup> that springs from the bole at that distance from the roots. The wood-pigeons were much more numerous, also more eager to be fed. They seemed to understand very quickly that my bread and grain was for them and not the sparrows; but although they stationed themselves close to me, the little robbers we were jointly trying to outwit managed to get some pieces of bread by flying up and catching them before they touched the sward. This little comedy over, I visited the water-fowl, ducks of many kinds, sheldrakes, geese from many lands, swans black and swans white. To see birds in prison during the spring mood of which I have spoken is not only no satisfaction but a positive pain; here, albeit without that

<sup>1</sup> Oh, to be in England,  
Now that April's there!  
And whoever wakes in England  
Sees some morning, unaware,  
That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf  
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,  
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough  
In England—now.

ROBERT BROWNING.



large liberty that nature gives, they are free in a measure; and swimming and diving or dozing in the sunshine, with the blue sky above them, they are perhaps unconscious of any restraint. Walking along the margin I noticed three children some yards ahead of me; two were quite small, but the third, in whose charge the others were, was a robust-looking girl aged about ten or eleven years. From their dress and appearance I took them to be the children of a respectable artisan or small tradesman; but what chiefly attracted my attention was the very great pleasure the elder girl appeared to take in the birds. She had come well provided with stale bread to feed them, and after giving moderately of her store to the wood-pigeons and sparrows, she went on to the others, native and exotic, that were disporting themselves in the water, or sunning themselves on the green bank. She did not cast her bread on the water in the manner usual with visitors, but was anxious to feed all the different species, or as many as she could attract to her, and appeared satisfied when any one individual of a particular kind got a fragment of her bread. Meanwhile she talked eagerly to the little ones, calling their attention to the different birds. Drawing near I also became an

interested listener; and then, in answer to my questions, she began telling me what all these strange fowls were. "This," she said, glad to give information, "is the Canadian goose, and there is the Egyptian goose; and here is the king-duck coming towards us; and do you see that large beautiful bird standing by itself, that will not come to be fed?—that is the golden duck. But that is not its real name; I don't know them all, and so I name some for myself. I call that one the golden duck because in the sun its feathers sometimes shine like gold." It was a rare pleasure to listen to her, and, seeing what sort of a girl she was, and how much in love with her subject, I in my turn told her a great deal about the birds before us, also of other birds she had never seen or heard of in other and distant lands that have a nobler bird-life than ours; and after she had listened eagerly for some minutes, and had then been silent a little while, she all at once pressed her two hands together, and exclaimed rapturously, "Oh, I do so love the birds!"

I replied that that was not strange, since it is impossible for us not to love whatever is lovely, and of all living things birds were made most beautiful.

Then I walked away, but could not forget the

words she had exclaimed, her whole appearance, the face flushed with colour, the eloquent brown eyes sparkling, the pressed palms, the sudden spontaneous passion of delight and desire in her tone. The picture was in my mind all that day, and lived through the next, and so wrought on me that I could not longer keep away from the birds, which I, too, loved; for now all at once it seemed to me that life was not life without them; that I was grown sick and all my senses dim; that only the wished sight of wild birds could medicine my vision; that only by drenching it in their wild melody could my tired brain recover its lost vigour.



## II

AFTER wandering somewhat aimlessly about the country for a couple of days I stumbled by chance on just such a spot as I had been wishing to find—a rustic village not too far away; it was not more than twenty-five minutes' walk from a small station, less than one hour by rail from London.

The way to the village was through cornfields, bordered by hedges and rows of majestic elms. Beyond it, but quite near, there was a wood, principally of beech, over a mile in length, with a public path running through it. On the right hand, ten minutes' walk from the village, there was a long green hill, the ascent to which was gentle, but on the further side it sloped abruptly down to the Thames.

On the left hand there was another hill, with cottages and orchards with small fields interspersed on the slope and summit, so that the middle part, where I lodged, was in a pretty deep hollow. There was no sound of traffic there.

and few farmers' carts came that way as it was well away from the roads and the deep narrow winding lanes were exceedingly rough, like the stony beds of dried-up streams.

In the deepest part of the coombe, in the middle of the village, there was a well where the cottagers drew their water; and in the summer evenings the youths and maidens came there, with or without jugs and buckets, to indulge in conversation which was mostly of the rustic bantering kind, mixed with a good deal of loud laughter. Close by was the inn, where the men sat on benches in the tap-room in grave discourse over their pipes and beer.

Wishing to make their acquaintance I went in and sat down among them, and found them a little shy, not to say standoffish, at first. Rustics are often suspicious of the stranger within their gates; but after paying for beer all round the frost melted and we were soon deep in talk about the wild life of the place, always a safe and pleasant subject in a village. One rough-looking brown-faced man with iron-grey hair became a sort of spokesman for the company and replied to most of my questions.

"And what about badgers?" I asked. "In such a rough-looking spot with woods and all,



it strikes me as just the sort of place where one would find that animal."

A long dead silence followed. I caught the eye of the man nearest me and repeated the question; "Are there no badgers here?" His eyes fell; then he exchanged glances with some of the others, all very serious; and at length my man, addressing the person who had acted as spokesman before, said, "Perhaps you'll tell the gentleman if there are any badgers here."

At that the rough man looked at me very sharply and answered stiffly, "Not as I know of."

A few weeks later at a small town in the neighbourhood I got into conversation with a hotel-keeper, an intelligent man who gave me a good deal of information about the country. He asked me where I was staying, and, on my telling him, said, "Ah, I know it well—that village in a hole, and a very nasty hole to get in, too; at any rate it was so formerly. They are getting a bit civilised now, but I remember the time when a stranger couldn't show himself in the place without being jeered at and insulted. Yes, they were a rough lot down in that hole—the Badgers they were called, and that's what they are called still."

The pity of it was that I didn't know this before I went among them! But it was not remembered against me that I had wounded their susceptibilities. They soon found that I was nothing but a harmless field naturalist, and I had friendly relations with many of them.

At the extremity of the straggling village was the beginning of an extensive common, where it was always possible to spend an hour or two without seeing a human creature. A few sheep grazed and browsed there, roaming about in twos and threes and half-dozens, tearing their fleeces for the benefit of nest-building birds in the great tangled masses of mingled furze and bramble and briar. Birds were abundant there—all those kinds that love the common's openness and the rough thorny vegetation that flourishes on it. But the village, or rather the large open space occupied by it, formed the headquarters and centre of a paradise of birds, as I soon began to think it; for the cottages and houses were widely separated, the meanest having a garden and some trees, and in most cases there was an old orchard of apple, cherry, and walnut trees to each habitation; and out of this mass of greenery, which hid the houses and made the place look more like a wood than

a village, towered the great elms in rows and in groups.

On first approaching the place I heard, mingled with many other voices, that of the nightingale; and as it was for the medicine of its pure, fresh melody that I particularly craved, I was glad to find a lodging in one of the cottages, and to remain there for several weeks.

The small care which the nightingale took to live up to his reputation in this place surprised me a little. Here he could always be heard in the daytime—not one bird, but a dozen—in different parts of the village; but he sang not at night. This I set down to the fact that nights were dark and the weather unsettled. But later, when the weather grew warmer and there were brilliant moonlight nights, he was still a silent bird except by day.

I was also a little surprised at his tameness. On first coming to the village, when I ran after every nightingale I heard to get as near him as possible, I was occasionally led by the sound to a cottage, and in some instances I found the singer perched within three or four yards of an open window or door. At my own cottage, when the woman who waited on me shook the breakfast cloth at the front door, the bird that

came to pick up the crumbs was the nightingale, not the robin. When by chance he met a sparrow there, he attacked and chased it away. It was a feast of nightingales. An elderly woman of the village explained to me that the nightingales and other small birds were common and tame in the village because no person disturbed them. I smile now when recording the good old dame's words.

On my second day at the village it happened to be raining—a warm mizzling rain without wind—and the nightingales were as vocal as in fine, bright weather. I heard one in a narrow lane, and went towards it, treading softly in order not to scare it away, until I got within eight or ten yards of it, as it sat on a dead projecting twig. This was a twig of a low thorn tree growing up from the hedge, projecting through the foliage, and the bird, perched near its end, sat only about five feet above the bare ground of the lane. Now I owe my best thanks to this individual nightingale for sharply calling to my mind a common pestilent delusion, which I have always hated, but had never yet raised my voice against—namely, that all wild creatures exist in constant fear of an attack from the numberless subtle or powerful enemies that are

always waiting and watching for an opportunity to spring upon and destroy them. The truth is, that although their enemies be legion, and that every day, and even several times on each day, they may be threatened with destruction, they are absolutely free from apprehension except when in the immediate presence of danger. Suspicion there may be at times, and the suspicion may cause them to remove themselves to a greater distance from the object that excites it; but the emotion is so slight, the action so almost automatic, that the singing bird will fly to another bush a dozen yards away, and at once resume his interrupted song. Again, a bird will see the deadliest enemy of its kind and unless it be so close as to actually threaten his life, he will regard it with the greatest indifference, or will only be moved to anger at its presence. Here was this nightingale singing in the rain, seeing but not heeding me; while beneath the hedge, almost directly under the twig it sat on, a black cat was watching it with luminous yellow eyes. I did not see the cat at first, but have no doubt that the nightingale had seen and knew that it was there. High up on the tops of the thorn a couple of sparrows were silently perched. Perhaps, like myself, they had come there to

listen. After I had been standing motionless, drinking in that dulcet music for at least five minutes, one of the two sparrows dropped from the perch straight down, and alighting on the bare wet ground directly under the nightingale, began busily pecking at something eatable it had discovered. No sooner had he begun pecking than out leaped the concealed cat on to him. The sparrow fluttered wildly up from beneath or between the claws and escaped as if by a miracle. The cat raised itself up, glared round, and, catching sight of me close by, sprang back into the hedge and was gone. But all this time the exposed nightingale, perched only five feet above the spot where the attack had been made and the sparrow had so nearly lost his life, had continued singing; and he sang on for some minutes after. I suppose that he had seen the cat before, and knew instinctively that he was beyond its reach, that it was a terrestrial not an aerial enemy, and so feared it not at all; and he would perhaps have continued singing if the sparrow had been caught and instantly killed.

Quite early in June I began to feel just a little cross with the nightingales, for they almost ceased singing; and considering that the spring had been a backward one, it seemed to me that



their silence was coming too soon. I was not sufficiently regardful of the fact that their lays are solitary, as the poet has said, that they ask for no witness of their song, nor thirst for human praise. They were all nesting now. But if I heard them less, I saw much more of them, especially of one individual, the male bird of a couple that had made their nest in a hedge a stone's-throw from the cottage. A favourite morning perch of this bird was on a small wooden gate four or five yards away from my window. It was an open, sunny spot, where his restless, bright eyes could sweep the lane, up and down; and he could there also give vent to his superfluous energy by lording it over a few sparrows and other small birds that visited the spot. I greatly admired the fine alert figure of the pugnacious little creature as he perched there so close to me, and so fearless. His striking resemblance to the robin in form, size, and in his motions, made his extreme familiarity seem only natural. The robin is greatly distinguished in a sober-plumaged company by the vivid tint on his breast. He is like the autumn leaf that catches a ray of sunlight on its surface, and shines conspicuously among russet leaves. But the clear brown of the nightingale is beautiful too.

This same nightingale was keeping a little surprise in store for me. Although he took no notice of me sitting at the open window, whenever I went thirty or forty yards from the gate along the narrow lane that faced it, my presence troubled him and his mate only too much. They would flit round my head emitting the two strongly contrasted sounds with which they express solicitude—the clear, thin, plaintive, or wailing note, and the low, jarring sound, an alternate lamenting and girding. One day when I approached the nest they displayed more anxiety than usual, fluttering close to me, wailing and croaking more vehemently than ever, when all at once the male, at the height of his excitement, burst into singing. Half a dozen notes were uttered rapidly with great strength, then the small complaining cry again, and at intervals a fresh burst of melody. I have remarked the same thing in other singing birds, species in which the harsh grating or piercing sounds that properly express violent emotions of a painful kind have been nearly or quite lost. In the nightingale this part of the bird's language has lost its original character, and has dwindled to something very small. Solicitude, fear, anger, are expressed with sounds that are mere lisps

compared with those emitted by the bird when singing. It is worthy of remark that some of the most highly developed melodists—and I am now thinking of the mocking-birds—never, in moments of extreme agitation, fall into this confusion and use singing notes that express agreeable emotions to express such as are painful. But in the mocking-bird the primitive harsh and grating cries have not been lost nor softened to sounds hardly distinguished from those that are emitted by way of song.



## III

By this time all the birds were breeding, some already breeding a second time. And now I began to suspect that they were not quite so undisturbed as the old dame had led me to believe; that they had not found a paradise in the village after all. One morning, as I moved softly along the hedge in my nightingale's lane, all at once I heard, in the old grassy orchard to which it formed a boundary, swishing sounds of scuttling feet and half-suppressed exclamations of alarm; then a crashing through the hedge, and out, almost at my feet, rushed and leaped and tumbled half a dozen urchins, who had suddenly been frightened from a birds'-nesting raid. Clothes torn; hands and faces scratched with thorns; hatless, their tow-coloured hair all disordered, or standing up like a white crest above their brown faces; rounded eyes staring—what an extraordinarily wild appearance they had! I was back in very old times, in the Britain of a thousand years before the coming of the Romans,

and these were her young barbarians, learning their life's business in little things.

No, the birds of the village were not undisturbed while breeding; but happily the young savages never found my nightingale's nest. One day the bird came to the gate as usual, and was more alert and pugnacious than ever; and no wonder, for his mate came too, and with them four young birds. For a week they were about the cottage every day; then they dispersed, and one beautiful bright morning the male bird, in his old place near my window, attempted to sing, beginning with that rich, melodious throbbing, which is usually called *jugging*, and following with half a dozen beautiful notes. That was all. It was July, and I heard no more music from him or from any other of his kind.

I have perhaps written at too great length of this bird. The nightingale was after all only one of the fifty-nine species I succeeded in identifying during my sojourn at the village. There were more. I heard the calls and cries of others in the wood and various places, but refused, except in the case of the too elusive crake, to set down any in my list that I did not see. It was not my ambition to make a long list.

My greatest desire was to see well those that interested me most. But those who go forth, as I did, to look for birds that are a sight for sore eyes must meet with many a disappointment. In all those fruit and shade trees that covered the village with a cloud of verdure, and in the neighbouring woods, not once did I catch a glimpse of the green woodpecker, a beautiful conspicuous bird, supposed to be increasing in many places in England. Its absence from so promising a locality seemed strange. Another species, also said to be increasing in the country, the turtledove, was extremely abundant. In the tall beech woods its low, monotonous crooning note was heard all day long from all sides. In shady places, where the loud, shrill bird-voices are few, one prefers this sound to the set song of the wood-pigeon, being more continuous and soothing, and of the nature of a lullaby. It sometimes reminded me of the low monotone I have heard from a Patagonian mother when singing her "swart pappoose" to sleep. Still, I would gladly have spared many of these woodland crooners for the sake of one magpie—that bird of fine feathers and a bright mind, which I had not looked on for a whole year and now hoped to see again. But he was not there; and



after I had looked for myself, some of the natives assured me that no magpie had been seen for years in that wood.

For a time I feared that I was to be just as unlucky with regard to the jay, seeing that the owner of the extensive beech woods adjoining the village permitted his keeper to kill the most interesting birds in it—kestrels and sparrow-hawks, owls, jays, and magpies. He was a new man comparatively in the place and wanted to increase his preserves, but to do this it was necessary first to exclude the villagers—the Badgers, who were no doubt partial to pheasants' eggs. Now, to close an ancient right of way is a ticklish business, and this was an important one seeing that the village women did their Saturday marketing in the town beyond the wood and river, and with the path closed they would have two miles further to walk. The new lord wisely took this into consideration and set himself to win the goodwill of the people before attempting any strong measures. He walked in the lanes and was affable to the cottage women and nice to the children, and by and by he exclaimed, "What! no institute, no hall or any place where you can meet and spend the long winter evenings? Well, I'll soon see to that." And

soon to their delight they had a nice building reared on a piece of land which he bought for the purpose, furnished with tables, chairs, bagatelle boards, and all accessories; and he also supplied them with newspapers and magazines. He was immensely popular but appeared to think little of what he had done; when they expressed their gratitude to him he would wave his hand and answer, "Oh, I'm going to do a great deal more than that for you."

A few months went by, then he caused a notice to be put up about the neighbourhood that the path through the wood was going to be closed "by order." No one took any notice, and a few weeks later his workmen appeared on the scene and erected a huge oakwood barrier across the path; also a notice on a board that the wood was strictly private and trespassers would be prosecuted. The villagers met in force at the institute and the inn that evening, and after discussing the matter over their ale they armed themselves with axes and went in a body and demolished the barrier.

The owner was disgusted but took no action. "This," he said, "is their gratitude," and from that day he ceased to subscribe to the local charities or take his walks in the village. He

had given the institute and so could not pull it down nor prevent them from using it.

It was refreshing to hear that the Badgers had shown a proper spirit in the matter, and I was grateful to them for having kept the right of way, as on most days I spent several hours in the beautiful woods.

To return to the jay. In spite of the keeper's persecution I knew that he was there; every morning when I got up to look out of the window between four and five o'clock, I heard from some quarter of the village that curious subdued, but far-reaching scolding note he is accustomed to utter when his suspicions have been aroused. That was the jay's custom, to come from the woods before even the earliest risers were up, and forage in the village. By and by I discovered that, by lying motionless for an hour or so on the dry moss in the wood, he would at length grow so bold as to allow himself to be seen, but high up among the topmost branches. Then, by means of my binocular I had the wild thing on my thumb, so to speak, exhibiting himself to me, inquisitive, perplexed, suspicious, enraged by turns, as he flitted wings and tail, lifted and lowered his crest, glancing down with bright, wild eyes. What a beautiful hypocrisy

and delightful power this is which enables us, sitting or lying motionless, feigning sleep perhaps, thus to fool this wild, elusive creature, and bring all his cunning to naught! He is so much smaller and keener-sighted, able to fly, to perch far up above me, to shift his position every minute or two, masking his small figure with this or that tuft of leaves, while still keeping his eyes on me—in spite of it all, to have him so close, and, without moving or taking any trouble, to see him so much better than he can see me! But this is a legitimate trickery of science, so innocent that we can laugh at our dupe when we practise it! nor do we afterwards despise our superior cunning and feel ashamed, as when we slaughter wild birds with far-reaching shot which they cannot escape.

All these corvine birds which the gamekeeper pursues so relentlessly, albeit they were before him, killing, when they killed, to better purpose, and, let us hope, will exist after him—all these must greatly surpass other kinds in sagacity to have escaped extermination. In the present condition of things the jay is perhaps the best off on account of his smaller size and less conspicuous colouring; but whether more cunning than

the crow or magpie or not, in perpetual alertness and restless energy or intensity of life he is without an equal among British birds. And this quality forms his chief attraction; it is more to the mind than his lifted crest and bright eyes, his fine vinaceous brown, and the patch of sky-blue on his wings. One would miss him greatly from the woods; some of the melody may well be spared for the sake of the sudden, brain-piercing, rasping, rending scream with which he startles us in our solitary forest walks.

It is this extreme liveliness of the jay which makes it more distressing to the mind to see it pent in a cage than other birds of its family, such as the magpie, just as it is more distressing to see a skylark than a finch in prison, because the lark has an irresistible impulse to rise when his singing fit is on. Sing he must, in or out of prison, yet there can be little joy in the performance when the bird is incessantly teased with the unsatisfied desire to mount and pour out his music at heaven's gate.

Out of cages, jays make charming and beautiful pets, and some who have kept them have assured me that they are not mischievous birds. The late Mark Melford, one time when I visited him, had two jays, handsome birds in bright

glossy plumage, always free to roam where they liked, indoors or out. We were sitting talking in his garden when one of the jays came flying to us and perched on a wooden ledge a few feet from and above our heads, and after sitting quietly for a little while he suddenly made a dash at my head, just brushing it with his wings, then returned to his perch. At intervals of a few moments he repeated this action, and when I remarked that he probably resented the presence of a stranger, Melford exclaimed, "Oh, no, he wants to play with you,—that's all."

His manner of playing was rather startling: so long as I kept my eyes on him he remained motionless, but the instant my attention wandered, or when in speaking I looked at my companion, the sudden violent dash at my head would be made.

I was assured by Melford that his birds never carried off and concealed bright objects, a habit which it has been said the jay as well as the magpie possesses.

"What would he do with this shilling if I tossed it to him?" I asked.

"Catch it," he returned. "It would simply be play to him, but he wouldn't carry it off."

I tossed up the shilling, and the bird had

perhaps expected me to do so, as he deftly caught it just as a dog catches a biscuit when you toss one to him. After keeping it a few moments in his beak he put it down at his side. I took out four more shilling pieces and tossed them quickly one by one, and he caught them without a miss and placed them one by one with the other, not scattered about but in a neat pile. Then, seeing that I had no more shillings, he flew off.

After these few playful passages with one of his birds, I could understand Melford's feeling about his free pet jays, magpies, and jackdaws; they were not merely birds to him but rather like so many delightful little children in the beautiful shape of birds.

There was no rookery in or near the village, but a large flock of rooks were always to be seen feeding and sunning themselves in some level meadows near the river. It struck me one day as a very fine sight, when an old bird, who looked larger and blacker and greyer-faced than the others, and might have been the father and leader of them all, got up on a low post, and with wide-open beak poured forth a long series of most impressive caws. One always wonders at the meaning of such displays. Is the old bird



addressing the others in the rook language on some matter of great moment; or is he only expressing some feeling in the only language he has—those long, hoarse, uninflected sounds; and if so, what feeling? Probably a very common one. The rooks appeared happy and prosperous, feeding in the meadow grass in that June weather, with the hot sun shining on their glossy coats. Their days of want were long past and forgotten; the anxious breeding period was over; the tempest in the tall trees; the annual slaughter of the young birds,—all past and forgotten. The old rook was simply expressing the old truth that life was worth living.

These rooks were usually accompanied by two or three or more crows—a bird of so ill-repute that the most out-and-out enthusiast for protection must find it hard to say a word in its favour. At any rate the rooks must think, if they think at all, that this frequent visitor and attendant of theirs is more kin than kind. I have related in a former work that I once saw a peregrine strike down and kill an owl—a sight that made me gasp with astonishment. But I am inclined to think of this act as only a slip, a slight aberration, on the part of the falcon, so universal is the sense of relationship among the

kinds that have the rapacious habit; or, at the worst, it was merely an isolated act of devilry and daring of the sharp-winged pirate of the sky, a sudden assertion of overmastering energy and power, and a very slight offence compared with that of the crow when he carries off and devours his callow little cousins of the rookery.

One of the first birds I went out to seek—perhaps the most medicinal of all birds to see—was the kingfisher; but he was not anywhere on the river margin, although suitable places were plentiful enough, and myriads of small fishes were visible in the shallow water, seen at rest like dim-pointed stripes beneath the surface, and darting away and scattering outwards like a flight of arrows at any person's approach. Walking along the river bank one day, when the place was still new to me, I discovered a stream, and following it up arrived at a spot where a clump of trees overhung the water, casting on it a deep shade. On the other side of the stream buttercups grew so thickly that the glazed petals of the flowers were touching; the meadow was one broad expanse of brilliant yellow. I had not been standing half a minute in the shade before the bird I had been seeking darted out from the

margin almost beneath my feet, and then, instead of flying up or down stream, sped like an arrow across the field of buttercups. It was a very bright day, and the bird going from me with the sunshine full on it, appeared entirely of a shining splendid green. Never had I seen the kingfisher in such favourable circumstances; flying so low above the flowery level that the swiftly vibrating wings must have touched the yellow petals, he was like a waif from some far tropical land. The bird was tropical, but I doubt if there exists within the tropics anything to compare with a field of buttercups—such large and unbroken surfaces of the most brilliant colour in nature. The first bird's mate appeared a minute later, flying in the same direction, and producing the same splendid effect, and also green. These two alone were seen, and only on this occasion, although I often re-visited the spot, hoping to find them again.

Now the kingfisher is blue, and I am puzzled to know why on this one occasion it appeared green. I have in a former work on Argentine ornithology, entitled *Birds of La Plata*, described a contrary effect in a small and beautiful tyrant-bird, *Cyanotis azaræ*, variously called in the vernacular, all-coloured or many-coloured kinglet.

It has a little blue on its head, but its entire back from the nape to the tail is deep green. It lives in beds of bulrushes, and when seen flying from the spectator in a very strong light at a distance of twenty or thirty yards, its colour in appearance is bright cerulean blue. It is a sunlight effect, but how produced is a mystery to me. In the case of the two green kingfishers I am inclined to think that the yellow of that shining field of buttercups in some way produced the illusion.

Why are these exquisite birds so rare, even in situations so favourable to them as the one I have described? Are they killed by severe frosts? An ornithological friend from Oxfordshire assures me that it will take several favourable seasons to make good the losses of the late terrible winter of 1891-2. But this, as every ornithologist knows, is only a part of the truth. The large number of stuffed kingfishers under glass shades that one sees in houses of all descriptions in town and country, but most frequently in the parlours of country cottages and inns, tell a melancholy story. Some time ago a young man showed me three stuffed kingfishers in a case, and informed me that he had shot them at a place (which he named) quite close to London. He said that these three birds were the last of their kind ever

seen there; that he had gone week after week and watched and waited, until one by one, at long intervals, he had secured them all; and that two years had passed since the last one was killed, and no other kingfisher had been seen at the place. He added that the waterside which these birds had frequented was resorted to by crowds of London working people on Saturday afternoons, Sundays and other holidays. The fact that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of pairs of tired eyes would have been freshened and gladdened by the sight of their rare gem-like beauty only made him prouder of his achievement. This young man was a cockney of the small shop-keeping class—a Philistine of the Philistines—hence there was no call to feel surprise at his self-glorification over such a matter. But what shall we say of that writer whose masterly works on English rural life are familiar to everyone, who is regarded as first among “lovers of nature,” when he relates that he invariably carried a gun when out of doors mainly with the object of shooting any kingfisher he might chance to see, as the dead bird always formed an acceptable present to the cottager’s wife, who would get it stuffed and keep it as an ornament on her parlour mantelshelf!

Happily for the kingfisher, and for human beings who love nature, the old idea that beautiful birds were meant to be destroyed for fun by anyone and everyone, from the small-brained detestable cockney sportsman I have mentioned to the gentlemen who write books about the beauties of nature, is now gradually giving place to this new one, that it would be better to preserve the beautiful things we possess. Half a century before the author of *Wild Life in a Southern County* amused himself by carrying a gun to shoot kingfishers, the inhabitants of that same county of Wiltshire were bathed in tears—so I read in an old Salisbury newspaper—at the tragic death of a young gentleman of great distinction, great social charm, great promise. He was out shooting swallows with a friend who, firing at a passing swallow, had the misfortune to shoot and kill *him*.

At the present time when gentlemen practise a little at flying birds to get their hand in before the first of September, they shoot sparrows as a rule, or if they shoot swallows, which afford them better practice, they do not say anything about it.

## IV

WHERE the stream broadened and mixed with the river there existed a dense and extensive rush-bed—an island of rushes separated by a deep channel some twelve or fourteen yards in width from the bank. This was a favourite nesting-place of the sedge-warblers; occasionally as many as a dozen birds could be heard singing at the same time, although in no sense together, and the effect was indeed curious. This is not a song that spurts and gushes up fountain-like, in the manner of the robin's and of some other kinds, sprinkling the listener, so to speak, with a sparkling vocal spray; but it keeps low down, a song that flows along the surface, gurgling and prattling like musical running water in its shallow pebbly channel. Listening again, the similitude that seemed appropriate at first was cast aside for another, and then another still. The hidden singers scattered all about their rushy island were small fantastic human minstrels, performing on a variety of instruments,



some unknown, others recognisable—bones and castanets, tiny hurdy-gurdies, piccoloes, banjos, tabours, and Pandean pipes—a strange medley!

Interesting as this concert was, it held me less than the solitary singing of a sedge-warbler that lived by himself, or with only his mate, higher up where the stream was narrow so that I could get near him; for he not only tickled my ears with his rapid reedy music, but amused my mind as well with a pretty little problem in bird psychology. I could sit within a few yards of his tangled haunt without hearing a note; but if I jumped up and made a noise, or struck the branches with my stick, he would incontinently burst into song. It is a very well-known habit of the bird, and on account of it and of the very peculiar character of the sounds emitted, his song is frequently described by ornithologists as mocking, defiant, scolding, angry, etc. It seems clear that at different times the bird sings from different exciting causes. When, undisturbed by a strange presence, he bursts spontaneously into singing, the music, as in other species, is simply an expression of overflowing gladness; at other times the bird expresses such feelings as alarm, suspicion, solicitude, perhaps anger, by singing the same song. How does this come about?

I have stated, when speaking of the nightingale, that birds in which the singing faculty is highly developed sometimes make the mistake of bursting into song when anxious or distressed or in pain, but that this is not the case with the mocking-birds. Some species of these brilliant songsters of the New World in their passion for variety, to put it in that way, import every harsh and grating cry and sound they know into their song; but, on the other hand, when anxious for the safety of their young, or otherwise distressed, they emit only the harsh and grating sounds—never a musical note. In the sedge-warbler the harsh scolding sounds that express alarm, solicitude, and other painful emotions, have also been made a part of the musical performance; but this differs from the songs of most species, the mocking-birds included, in the extraordinary rapidity with which it is enunciated; once the song begins it goes on swiftly to the finish, harsh and melodious notes seeming to overlap and mingle, the sounds forming, to speak in metaphor, a close intricate pattern of strongly contrasted colours. Now the song invariably begins with the harsh notes—the sounds which, at other times, express alarm and other more or less painful emotions—and it strikes me as a probable explanation that

when the bird in the singing season has been startled into uttering these harsh and grating sounds, as when a stone is flung into the rushes, he is incapable of uttering them only, but the singing notes they suggest, which he is in the habit of uttering, follow automatically.

The spot where I observed this wee feathered fantasy, the tantalising sprite of the rushes, and where I soon ceased to see, hear, or think about him, calls for a fuller description. On one side the wooded hill sloped downward to the stream; on the other side spread the meadows where the rooks came every day to feed, or to sit and stand about motionless, looking like birds cut out of jet, scattered over about half an acre of the grassy level ground. Stout old pollard-willows grew here and there along the banks and were pleasant to see, this being the one man-mutilated thing in nature which, to my mind, not infrequently gains in beauty by the mutilation, so admirably does it fit into and harmonise with the landscape. At one point there was a deep, nearly stagnant pool, separated from the stream by a strip of wet rushy ground, its still dark surface covered with water-lilies, not yet in bloom. They were just beginning to show their polished buds, shaped like snakes' heads, above

the broad oily leaves floating like islands on the surface. The stream itself was (on my side) fringed with bulrushes and other aquatic plants; on the opposite bank there were some large alders lifting their branches above great masses of bramble and rose-briar, all together forming as rich and beautiful a tangle as one could find even in the most luxuriant of the wild unkept hedges round the village. The briars especially flourished wonderfully at this spot, climbing high and dropping their long slim branches quite down to the surface of the water, and in some places forming an arch above the stream. A short distance from this tangle, so abundantly sprinkled with its pale delicate roses, the water was spanned by a small wooden bridge, which no person appeared to use, but which had a use. It formed the one dry clear spot in the midst of all that moist vegetation, and the birds that came from the wood to drink and search for worms and small caterpillars first alighted on the bridge. There they would rest a few moments, take a look round, then fly to some favourite spot where succulent morsels had been picked up on previous visits. Thrushes, blackbirds, sparrows, reed-buntings, chaffinches, tits, wrens, with many other species, succeeded each other

all day long; for now they mostly had young to provide for, and it was their busiest time.

The unsullied beauty and solitariness of this spot made me wish at first that I was a boy once more, to climb and to swim, to revel in the sunshine and flowers, to be nearer in spirit to the birds and dragon-flies and water-rats; then, that I could build a cabin and live there all the summer long, forgetful of the world and its affairs, with no human creature to keep me company, and no book to read, or with only one slim volume, some Spanish poet, let me say Melendez for preference—only a small selection from his too voluminous writings; for he, albeit an eighteenth-century singer, was perhaps the last of that long illustrious line of poets who sang as no others have sung of the pure delightfulness of a life with nature. Something of this charm is undoubtedly due to the beauty of the language they wrote in and to the free airy grace of assonants. What a hard artificial sound the rhyme too often has, the clink that falls at regular intervals as of a stone-breaker's hammer! In the freer kinds of Spanish poetry there are numberless verses that make the smoothest lines and lyrics of our sweetest and most facile singers, from Herrick to Swinburne, seem hard and

mechanical by comparison. But there is something more. I doubt for one thing if we are justified in the boast we sometimes make that the feeling for nature is stronger in our poets than in those of other countries. The most scientific critic may be unable to pick a hole in Tennyson's botany and zoology, but the passion for, and feeling of oneness with, nature may exist without this modern minute accuracy. Be this as it may, it was not Tennyson nor any other of our poets that I would have taken to my dreamed-of solitary cabin for companionship: Melendez came first to my mind. I think of his lines to a butterfly—

De donde alegre vienes  
Tan suelta y tan festiva,  
Las valles alegrando,  
Veloz mariposilla ? <sup>1</sup>

and can imagine him—the poet himself—coming to see me through the woods and down the hill with the careless ease and lightness of heart of his own purple-winged child of earth and air—*tan suelta y tan festiva*. Here in these four or

<sup>1</sup> May be roughly rendered thus:

Whence, O blithe one, comest thou  
With that airy, happy flight—  
Making the valleys glad,  
O swift-winged butterfly?

five words one may read the whole secret of his charm—the exquisite delicacy and seeming artlessness in the form, and the spirit that is in him—the old simple healthy natural gladness in nature, and feeling of kinship with all the children of life.

But I do not wish to disturb anyone in his prepossessions. It would greatly trouble me to think that my reader should, for the space of a page, or even of a single line, find himself in opposition to and not with me; and I am free to admit that with regard to poetry one's preferences change according to the mood one happens to be in and to the conditions generally. At home in murky London on most days I should probably seek pleasure and forgetfulness in Browning; but in such surroundings as I have been describing the lighter-hearted, elf-like Melendez accords best with my spirit, one whose finest songs are without human interest; who is irresponsible as the wind, and as unstained with earthly care as the limpid running water he delights in; who is brother to bird and bee and butterfly, and worships only liberty and sunshine, and is in love with nothing but a flower.

Nearly midway between the useful little bridge



and the rose-blossoming tangle I have spoken of there were three elm-trees growing in the open grassy space near the brook; they were not lofty, but had very wide-spreading horizontal branches, which made them look like oaks. This was an ideal spot in which to spend the sultry hours, and I had no sooner cast myself on the short grass in the shade than I noticed that the end of a projecting branch above my head, and about twenty feet from the ground, was the favourite perch of a tree-pipit. He sang in the air, and, circling gracefully down, would alight on the branch, where, sitting near me and plainly visible, he would finish his song and renew it at intervals; then, leaving the loved perch, he would drop singing to the ground, just a few yards beyond the tree's shadow; thence, singing again, he would mount up and up above the tree, only to slide down once more with set, un-fluttering wings, with a beautiful swaying motion, to the same old resting-place on the branch, there to sing and sing and sing.

If Melendez himself had come to me with flushed face and laughing eyes, and sat down on the grass at my side to recite one of his most enchanting poems, I should, with finger on lip, have enjoined silence; for in the mood I was

then in at that sequestered spot, with the landscape outside my shady green pavilion bathed and quivering in the brilliant sunshine, this small bird had suddenly become to me more than any other singer, feathered or human. And yet the tree-pipit is not very highly regarded among British melodists, on account of the little variety there is in its song. Nevertheless it is most sweet—perhaps the sweetest of all. It is true that there are thousands, nay, millions of things—sights and sounds and perfumes—which are or may be described as sweet, so common is the metaphor, and this too common use has perhaps somewhat degraded it; but in this case there is no other word so well suited to describe the sensation produced.

The tree-pipit has a comparatively short song, repeated, with some variation in the number and length of the notes, at brief intervals. The opening notes are thick or throaty, and similar in character to the throat-notes of many other species in this group, a softer sound than the throat-notes of the skylark and woodlark, which they somewhat resemble. The canary-like trills and thin piping notes, long drawn out, which follow vary greatly in different individuals, and in many cases the trills are omitted. But the

concluding notes of the song I am considering—which is only one note repeated again and again—are clear and beautifully inflected, and have that quality of sweetness, of lusciousness, I have mentioned. The note is uttered with a downward fall, more slowly and expressively at each repetition, as if the singer felt overcome at the sweetness of life and of his own expression, and languished somewhat at the close; its effect is like that of the perfume of the honeysuckle, infecting the mind with a soft delicious languor, a wish to lie perfectly still and drink of the same sweetness again and again in larger measure.

To some who are familiar with this by no means uncommon little bird, it may seem that I am overstating the charm of its melody. I can only say that the mood I was then in made me very keenly appreciative; also that I have never heard any other individual of this species able to produce precisely the same effect. We know that there are quite remarkable differences in the songs of birds of the same species, that among several that appear to be perfect and to sing alike one will possess a charm above the others. The truth is they are not alike; they affect us differently, but the sense is not fine enough or not sufficiently trained to detect the

cause. The poet's words may be used of this natural melody as well as of the works of art:

O the little more and how much it is!

There were about the village, within a few minutes' walk of the cottage, not fewer than half a dozen tree-pipits, each inhabiting a favourite spot where I could always count on finding and hearing him at almost any hour of the day from sunrise to sunset. Yet I cared not for these. To the one chosen bird I returned daily to spend the hot hours, lying in the shade and listening to his strain. Finally I allowed two or three days to slip by, and when I re-visited the old spot the secret charm had vanished. The bird was there, and rose and fell as formerly, pouring out his melody; but it was not the same; something was missing from those last sweet languishing notes. Perhaps in the interval there had been some disturbing accident in his little wild life, though I could hardly believe it, since his mate was still sitting about thirty yards from the tree on the five little mottled eggs in her nest. Or perhaps his midsummer's music had reached its highest point and was now in its declension. And perhaps the fault was in me. The virtue that draws and holds us does not hold us always

nor very long; it departs from all things, and we wonder why. The loss is in ourselves, although we do not know it. Nature, the chosen mistress of our heart, does not change towards us, yet she is now, even to-day,

Less full of purple colour and hid spice,  
and smiles and sparkles in vain to allure us, and  
when she touches us with her warm caressing  
touch, there is, compared with yesterday, only  
a faint response.



## V

COMING back from the waterside through the wood, after the hottest hours of the day were over, the crooning of the turtledoves would be heard again on every side—that summer beech-wood lullaby that seemed never to end. The other bird voices were of the willow-wren, the wood-wren, the coal-tit, and the now somewhat tiresome chiffchaff; from the distance would come the prolonged rich strain of the blackbird, and occasionally the lyric of the chaffinch. The song of this bird gains greatly when heard from a tall tree in the woodland silence; it has then a resonance and wildness which it appears to lack in the garden and orchard. In the village I had been glad to find that the chaffinch was not too common, that in the tangle of minstrelsy one could enjoy there his vigorous voice was not predominant.

Of all these woodland songsters the wood-wren impressed me the most. He could always be heard, no matter where I entered the wood,

since all this world of tall beeches was a favoured haunt of the wood-wren, each pair keeping to its own territory of half an acre of trees or so, and somewhere among those trees the male was always singing, far up, invisible to eyes beneath, in the topmost sunlit foliage of the tall trees. On entering the wood I would stand still for a few minutes to listen to the various sounds until that one fascinating sound would come to my ears from some distance away, and to that spot I would go to find a bed of last year's leaves to sit upon and listen. It was an enchanting experience to be there in that woodland twilight with the green cloud of leaves so far above me, to listen to the silence, to the faint whisper of the wind-touched leaves, then to little prelusive drops of musical sound, growing louder and falling faster until they ran into one prolonged trill. And there I would sit listening for half an hour or a whole hour; but the end would not come; 'the bird is indefatigable, and with his mysterious talk in the leaves would tire the sun himself and send him down the sky: for not until the sun has set and the wood has grown dark does the singing cease.

On emerging from the deep shade of the beeches into the wide grassy road that separated



the wood from the orchards and plantations of fruit trees, and pausing for a minute to look down on the more than half-hidden village, invariably the first loud sounds that reached my ear were those of the cuckoo, thrush, and black-bird. At all hours in the village, from early morning to evening twilight, these three voices sounded far and near above the others. I considered myself fortunate that no large tree near the cottage had been made choice of by a song-thrush as a singing-stand during the early hours. The nearest tree so favoured was on the further side of the field, so that when I woke at half-past three or four o'clock, the shrill indefatigable voice came in at the open window softened by distance and washed by the dewy atmosphere to greater purity. Thristle and skylark to be admired must be heard at a distance. But at that early hour when I sat by the open window the cuckoo's call was the commonest sound; the birds were everywhere, bird answering bird far and near, so persistently repeating their double note that this sound, which is in character unlike any other sound in nature, which one so listens for and longs to hear in spring, lost its old mystery and charm, and became of no more account than the cackle of the poultry-yard. It

was the cuckoo's village; sometimes three or four birds in hot pursuit of each other would dash through the trees that lined the further side of the lane and alight on that small tree at the gate which the nightingale was accustomed to visit later in the day.

Other birds that kept themselves very much out of sight during most of the time also came to the same small tree at that early hour. It was regularly visited, and its thin bole industriously examined, by the nuthatch and the quaint little mouse-like creeper. Doubtless they imagined that five o'clock was too early for heavy human creatures to be awake, and were either ignorant of my presence or thought proper to ignore it.

But where, during the days when the vociferous cuckoo, with hoarse chuckle and dissyllabic call and wild bubbling cry, was so much with us—where, in this period of many pleasant noises, was the cuckoo's mate, or maid, or messenger, the quaint and beautiful wryneck? There are few British birds, perhaps not one—not even the crafty black and white magpie, or mysterious moth-like goatsucker, or tropical kingfisher—more interesting to watch. At twilight I had lingered at the woodside, also in other likely

places, and the goatsucker had failed to appear, gliding and zig-zagging hither and thither on his dusky-mottled noiseless wings, and now this still heavier disappointment was mine. I could not find the wryneck. Those quiet grassy orchards, shut in by straggling hedges, should have had him as a favoured summer guest. Creeper and nuthatch, and starling and gem-like blue tit, found holes enough in the old trunks to breed in. And yet I knew that, albeit not common, he was there; I could not exactly say where, but somewhere on the other side of the next hedge or field or orchard; for I heard his unmistakable cry, now on this hand, now on that. Day after day I followed the voice, sometimes in my eagerness forcing my way through a brambly hedge to emerge with scratched hands and clothes torn like one that had been set upon and mauled by some savage animal of the cat kind; and still the quaint figure eluded my vision.

At last I began to have doubts about the creature that emitted that strange penetrating call. First heard as a bird-call, and nothing more, by degrees it grew more and more laugh-like—a long, far-reaching, ringing laugh; not the laugh I should like to hear from any person

I take an interest in, but a laugh with all the gladness, unction, and humanity gone out of it—a dry, mechanical sound, as if a soulless, lifeless wind-instrument had laughed. It was very curious. Listening to it day by day, something of the strange history of the being, once but no longer human, that uttered it grew up and took shape in my mind; for we all have in us something of this mysterious faculty. It was no bird, no wryneck, but a being that once, long, long, long ago, in that same beautiful place, had been a village boy—a free, careless, glad-hearted boy, like many another. But to this boy life was more than to others, since nature appeared immeasurably more vivid on account of his brighter senses; therefore his love of life and happiness in life greatly surpassed theirs. Annually the trees shed their leaves, the flowers perished, the birds flew away to some distant country beyond the horizon, and the sun grew pale and cold in the sky; but the bright impression all things made on him gave him a joy that was perennial. The briony, woodbine, and honeysuckle he had looked on withered in the hedges, but their presentments flourished untouched by frost, as if his warmth sustained and gave them perpetual life; in that inner magical world of memory the birds

still twittered and warbled, each after its kind, and the sun shone everlastingly. But he was living in a fool's paradise, as he discovered by and by when a boy who had been his playmate began to grow thin and pale, and at last fell sick and died. He crept near and watched his dead companion lying motionless, unbreathing, with a face that was like white clay; and then, more horrible still, he saw him taken out and put into a grave, and the heavy cold soil cast over him.

What did this strange and terrible thing mean? Now for the first time he was told that life is ours only for a season; that we also, like the leaves and flowers, flourish for a while, then fade and perish, and mingle with the dust. The sad knowledge had come too suddenly and in too vivid and dreadful a manner. He could not endure it. Only for a season!—only for a season! The earth would be green, and the sky blue, and the sun shine bright for ever, and he would not see, not know it! Struck with anguish at the thought, he stole away out of sight of the others to hide himself in woods and thickets, to brood alone on such a hateful destiny, and torture himself with vain longings, until he too grew pale and thin and large-eyed, like the boy

that had died, and those who saw him shook their heads and whispered to one another that he was not long for this world. He knew what they were saying, and it only served to increase his misery and fear, and made him hate them because they were insensible to the awful fact that death awaited them, or so little concerned that they had never taken the trouble to inform him of it. To eat and drink and sleep was all they cared for, and they regarded death with indifference, because their dull sight did not recognise the beauty and glory of the earth, nor their dull hearts respond to nature's everlasting gladness. The sight of the villagers, with their solemn head-shakings and whisperings, even of his nearest kindred, grew insupportable, and he at length disappeared from among them, and was seen no more with his white terror-stricken face. From that time he hid himself in the close thickets, supporting his miserable existence on wild fruits and leaves, and spending many hours each day lying in some sheltered spot, gazing up into that blue sunny sky, which was his to gaze on only for a season, while the large tears gathered in his eyes and rolled unheeded down his wasted cheeks.

At length during this period there occurred an

event which is the obscurest part of his history; for I know not who or what it was—my mind being in a mist about it—that came to or accidentally found him lying on a bed of grass and dried leaves in his thorny hiding-place. It may have been a gipsy or a witch—there were witches in those days—who, suddenly looking on his upturned face and seeing the hunger in his unfathomable eyes, loved him, in spite of her malignant nature; or a spirit out of the earth; or only a very wise man, an ancient white-haired solitary, whose life had been spent in finding out the secrets of nature. This being, becoming acquainted with the cause of the boy's grief and of his solitary miserable condition, began to comfort him by telling him that no grief was incurable, no desire that heart could conceive unattainable. He discoursed of the hidden potent properties of nature, unknown only to those who seek not to know them, of the splendid virtue inherent in all things, like the green and violet flames in the clear colourless raindrops which are seen only on rare occasions. Of life and death, he said that life was of the spirit which never dies, that death meant only a passage, a change of abode of the spirit, and the left body crumbled to dust when the spirit went out of it to continue



its existence elsewhere, but that those who hated the thought of such change could, by taking thought, prolong life and live for a thousand years, like the adder and tortoise, or for ever. But no, he would not leave the poor boy to grope alone and blindly after that hidden knowledge he was burning to possess. He pitied him too much. The means were simple and near to hand, the earth teemed with the virtue that would save him from the dissolution which so appalled him. He would be startled to hear in how small a thing and in how insignificant a creature resided the principle that could make his body, like his spirit, immortal. But exceeding great power often existed in small compass: witness the adder's tooth, which was to our sight no more than the point of the smallest thorn. Now, in the small ant there existed a principle of a greater potency than any other in nature; so strong and penetrating was it that even the dull and brutish kind of men who enquired not into hidden things knew something of its power. But the greatest of all the many qualities of this acid was unknown to them. The ants were a small people, but exceedingly wise and powerful. If a little human child had the strength of an ant he would surpass in power the mightiest

giant that ever lived. In the same way ants surpassed men in wisdom; and this strength and wisdom was the result of that acid principle in them. Now, if any person should be able to overcome his repugnance to so strange a food as to sustain himself on ants and nothing else, the effect of the acid on him would be to change and harden his flesh and make it impervious to decay or change of any kind. *He would, so long as he confined himself to this kind of food, be immortal.*

Not a moment did the wretched boy hesitate to make use of this new and wonderful knowledge. When he had found and broken open an ant-hill, so eager was he that, shutting his eyes, he snatched up the maddened insects by handfuls and swallowed them, dust and ants together, and was then tortured for hours, feeling and thinking that they were still alive within him, running about in search of an outlet and frantically biting. The strange food sickened him, so that he grew thinner and paler, until at last he could barely crawl on hands and feet, and was like a skeleton except for the great sad eyes that could still see the green earth and blue sky, and still reflected in their depths one fear and one desire. And slowly, day by day, as his system

accustomed itself to the new diet, his strength returned, and he was able once more to walk erect and run, and to climb a tree, where he could sit concealed among the thick foliage and survey the village where he had first seen the light and had passed the careless happy years of boyhood. But he cherished no tender memories and regrets; his sole thought was of the ants, and where to find a sufficiency of them to stay the cravings of hunger; for, after the first sensations of disgust had been overcome, he had begun to grow fond of this kind of food, and now consumed it with avidity. And as his strength increased, so did his dexterity in catching the small active insect prey. He no longer gathered the ants up in his palm and swallowed them along with dust and grit, but picked them up deftly, and conveyed them one by one to his mouth with lightning rapidity. Meanwhile that "acid principle," about which he had heard such wonderful things, was having its effect on his system. His skin changed its colour; he grew shrunken and small, until at length, after very many years, he dwindled to the grey little manikin of the present time. His mind, too, changed; he has no thought nor remembrance of his former life and condition and of his long-dead relations; but he still haunts

the village where he knows so well where to find the small ants, to pick them from off the ant-hill and from the trunks of trees with his quick little claw-like hands. Language and song are likewise forgotten with all human things, all except his laugh; for when hunger is satisfied, and the sun shines pleasantly as he reposes on the dry leaves on the ground or sits aloft on a branch, at times a sudden feeling of gladness possesses him, and he expresses it in that one way—the long wild ringing peal of laughter. Listening to that strange sound, although I could not see I could yet picture him, as, aware of my cautious approach, he moved shyly behind the mossy trunk of some tree and waited silently for me to pass. A lean grey little man, clad in a quaintly barred and mottled mantle, woven by his own hands from some soft silky material, and a close-fitting brown peaked cap on his head with one barred feather in it for ornament, and a small wizened grey face with a thin sharp nose, puckered lips, and a pair of round brilliant startled eyes.

So distinct was this image to my mind's eye that it became unnecessary for me to see the creature, and I ceased to look for him; then all at once came disillusion, when one day, hearing

the familiar high-pitched laugh with its penetrating and somewhat nasal tone, I looked and beheld the thing that had laughed just leaving its perch on a branch near the ground and winging its way across the field. It was only a bird after all—only a wryneck; and that mysterious faculty I spoke of, saying that we all of us possessed something of it (meaning only some of us), was nothing after all but the old common faculty of imagination.

Later on I saw it again on half a dozen occasions, but never succeeded in getting what I call a satisfying sight of it, perched woodpecker-wise on a mossy trunk, busy at its old fascinating occupation of deftly picking off the running ants.

It is melancholy to think that this quaint and beautiful bird of a unique type has been growing less and less common in our country during the last half-century, or for a longer period. In the last fifteen or twenty years the falling off has been very marked. The declension is not attributable to persecution in this case, since the bird is not on the gamekeeper's black list, nor has it yet become so rare as to cause the amateur collectors of dead birds throughout the country systematically to set about its extermination.

Doubtless that will come later on, when it will be in the same category with the golden oriole, hoopoe, furze-wren, and other species that are regarded as always worth killing; that is to say, it will come—the scramble for the wryneck's carcase—if nothing is done in the meantime to restrain the enthusiasm of those who value a bird only when the spirit of life that gave it flight and grace and beauty has been crushed out of it—when it is no longer a bird. The cause of its decline up till now cannot be known to us; we can only say in our ignorance that this type, like innumerable others that have ceased to exist, has probably run its course and is dying out. Or it might be imagined that its system is undergoing some slow change, which tells on the migratory instinct, that it is becoming more a resident species in its winter home in Africa. But all conjectures are idle in such a case. It is melancholy, at all events for the ornithologist, to think of an England without a wryneck; but before that still distant day arrives let us hope that the love of birds will have become a common feeling in the mass of the population, and that the variety of our bird life will have been increased by the addition of some chance colonists and of many new species introduced from distant regions.

I have lingered long over the wryneck, but have still a story to relate of this bird—not a fairy tale this time, but true.

On the border of the village adjoining the wood—the side where birds were more abundant, and which consequently had the greatest attraction for me—there stood an old picturesque cottage nearly concealed from sight by the hedge in front, with closely planted trees clustering round it. On one side was a grass field, on the other an orchard of old cherry, apple, and plum trees, all the property of the old man living in the cottage, who was a character in his way; at all events, he had not been fashioned in quite the same mould as the majority of the cottagers about him. They mostly, when past middle life, wore a heavy, dull, and somewhat depressed look. This man had a twinkle in his dark grey eyes, an expression of intelligent curiosity and fellowship; and his full face, bronzed with sixty or sixty-five years' exposure to the weather, was genial, as if the sunshine that had so long beaten on it had not been all used up in painting his skin that rich old-furniture colour, but had, some of it, filtered through the epidermis into the heart to make his existence pleasant and sweet. But it was a very rough-cast face, with



shapeless nose and thick lips. He was short and broad-shouldered, always in the warm weather in his shirt-sleeves, a shirt of some very coarse material and of an earthen colour, his brown thick arms bare to the elbows. Waistcoat and trousers looked as if he had worn them for half his life, and had a marbled or mottled appearance as if they had taken the various tints of all the objects and materials he had handled or rubbed against in his life's work—wood, mossy trees, grass, clay, bricks, stone, rusty iron, and dozens more. He wore the field-labourer's thick boots; his ancient rusty felt hat had long lost its original shape; and finally, to complete the portrait, a short black clay pipe was never out of his lips—never, at all events, when I saw him, which was often; for every day as I strolled past his domain he would be on the outside of his hedge, or just coming out of his gate, invariably with something in his hand—a spade, a fork, or stick of wood, or an old empty fruit basket. Although thus having the appearance of being very much occupied, he would always stop for a few minutes' talk with me; and by and by I began to suspect that he was a very social sort of person, and that it pleased him to have a little chat, but that he liked to have me think that

he met me by accident while going about his work.

One sunny morning as I came past his field he came out bearing a huge bundle of green grass on his head. "What!" he exclaimed, coming to a stand, "you here to-day? I thought you'd be away to the regatta."

I said that I knew little about regattas and cared less, that a day spent in watching and listening to the birds gave me more pleasure than all the regattas in the country. "I suppose you can't understand that?" I added.

He took the big green bundle from his head and set it down, pulled off his old hat to flap the dust out of it, then sucked at his short clay. "Well," he said at length, "some fancies one thing and some another, but we most of us like a regatta."

During the talk that followed I asked him if he knew the wryneck, and if it ever nested in his orchard. He did not know the bird; had never heard its name nor the other names of snake-bird and cuckoo's mate; and when I had minutely described its appearance, he said that no such bird was known in the village.

I assured him that he was mistaken, that I had heard the cry of the bird many times, and

had even heard it once at a distance since our conversation began. Hearing that distant cry had caused me to ask the question.

All at once he remembered that he knew, or had known formerly, the wryneck very well, but he had never learnt its name. About twenty or five-and-twenty years ago, he said, he saw the bird I had just described in his orchard, and as it appeared day after day and had a strange appearance as it moved up the tree trunks, he began to be interested in it. One day he saw it fly into a hole close to the ground in an old apple tree. "Now I've got you!" he exclaimed, and running to the spot thrust his hand in as far as he could, but was unable to reach the bird. Then he conceived the idea of starving it out, and stopped up the hole with clay. The following day at the same hour he again put in his hand, and this time succeeded in taking the bird. So strange was it to him that after showing it to his own family he took it round to exhibit it to his neighbours, and although some of them were old men not one among them had ever seen its like before. They concluded that it was a kind of nuthatch, but unlike the common nuthatch which they knew. After they had all seen and handled it and had finished the discussions

about it, he released it and saw it fly away; but, to his astonishment, it was back in his orchard a few hours later. In a few weeks it brought out its five or six young from the hole he had caught it in, and for several years it returned each season to breed in the same hole until the tree was blown down, after which the bird was seen no more.

What an experience the poor bird had suffered! First plastered up and left to starve or suffocate in its hollow tree; then captured and passed round from rough, horny hand to hand, while the villagers were discussing it in their slow ponderous fashion—how wildly its little wild heart must have palpitated!—and, finally, after being released, to go back at once to its eggs in that dangerous tree. I do not know which surprised me most, the bird's action in returning to its nest after such inhospitable treatment, or the ignorance of the villagers concerning it. The incident seemed to show that the wryneck had been scarce at this place for a very long period.

The villager, as a rule, is not a good observer, which is not strange, since no person is, or ever can be, a good observer of the things in which he is not specially interested; consequently the countryman only knows the most common and

the most conspicuous species. He plods through life with downcast eyes and a vision somewhat dimmed by indifference, forgetting, as he progresses, the small scraps of knowledge he acquired by looking sharply during the period of boyhood, when every living creature excited his attention. In Italy, notwithstanding the paucity of bird life, I believe that the peasants know their birds better. The reason of this is not far to seek; every bird, not excepting even the "temple-haunting martlet" and nightingale and minute golden-crested wren, is regarded only as a possible morsel to give a savour to a dish of polenta, if the shy little flitting thing can only be enticed within touching distance of the limed twigs. Thus they take a very strong interest in, and, in a sense, "love" birds. It is their passion for this kind of flavouring which has drained rural Italy of its songsters, and will in time have the same effect on Argentina, the country in which the withering stream of Italian emigration empties itself.

## VI

FROM the date of my arrival at the village in May, until I left it early in July, the great annual business of pairing, nest-building, and rearing the young was going on uninterrupted. The young of some of the earliest breeders were already strong on the wing when I took my first walks along the hedgerows, still in their early, vivid green, frequently observing my bird through a white and rose-tinted cloud of apple-blossoms; and when I left, some species that breed more than once in the season were rearing second broods or engaged in making new nests. On my very first day I discovered a nestful of fully-fledged blue tits in a hole in an apple tree; this struck me as a dangerous place for the young birds, as the tree leaned over towards the lane, and the hole could almost be reached by a person standing on the ground. On the next day I went to look at them, and, approaching noiselessly along the lane, spied two small boys with bright, clean faces—it was on a Sunday—standing

within three or four yards of the tree, watching the tits with intense interest. The parent birds were darting up and down, careless of their presence, finding food so quickly in the gooseberry bushes growing near the roots of the tree that they visited the hole every few moments; while the young birds, ever screaming for more, were gathered in a dense little cluster at the entrance, their yellow breasts showing very brightly against the rain-wet wood and the dark interior of the hole. The instant the two little watchers caught sight of me the excited look vanished from their faces, and they began to move off, gazing straight ahead in a somewhat vacant manner. This instantaneous and instinctive display of hypocrisy was highly entertaining, and would have made me laugh if it had not been for the serious purpose I had in my mind. "Now, look here," I said, "I know what you are after, so it's no use pretending that you are walking about and seeing nothing in particular. You've been watching the young tits. Well, I've been watching them too, and waiting to see them fly. I daresay they will be out by to-morrow or the next day, and I hope you little fellows won't try to drag them out before then."

They at once protested that they had no such



intention. They said that they never robbed birds' nests; that there were several nests at home in the garden and orchard, one of a nightingale with three eggs in it, but that they never took an egg. But some of the boys they knew, they said, took all the eggs they found; and there was one boy who got into every orchard and garden in the place, who was so sharp that few nests escaped him, and every nest he found he destroyed, breaking the eggs if there were any, and if there were young birds killing them.

Not, perhaps, without first mutilating them, I thought; for I know something of this kind of young "human devil," to use the phrase which Canon Wilberforce has made so famous in another connection. Later on I heard much more about the exploits of this champion bird-destroyer of the village from (strange to say) a bird-catcher by trade, a man of a rather low type of countenance, who lived, when at home, in a London slum. On the common where he spread his nets he had found, he told me, about thirty nests containing eggs or fledglings; but this boy had gone over the ground after him, and not many of the nests had escaped his sharp eyes.

I was satisfied that the young tits were quite safe, so far as these youngsters were concerned,

and only regretted that they were such small boys, and that the great nest-destroyer, whose evil deeds they spoke of with an angry colour in their cheeks, was a very strong boy, otherwise I should have advised them to "go" for him.

Oddly enough, I heard of another boy who exercised the same kind of cruelty and destructiveness over another common a few miles distant. Walking across it I spied two boys among the furze bushes, and at the same moment they saw me, whereupon one ran away and the other remained standing. A nice little fellow of about eight, he looked as if he had been crying. I asked him what it was all about, and he then told me that the bigger boy who had just run away was always on the common searching for nests, just to destroy them and kill the young birds; that he, my informant, had come there where he came every day just to have a peep at a linnet's nest with four eggs in it on which the bird was sitting; that the other boy, concealed among the bushes, had watched him go to the nest and had then rushed up and pulled the nest out of the bush.

"Why didn't you knock him down?" I asked.

“That’s what I tried to do before he pulled the nest out,” he said; and then he added sorrowfully: “He knocked me down.”

I am reminded here of a tale of ancient Greece about a boy of this description—the boy to be found in pretty well every parish in the land. This was a shepherd boy who followed or led his sheep to a distance from the village and amused his idle hours by snaring small birds to put their eyes out with a sharp thorn, then to toss them up just to see how and how far they would fly in the dark. He was seen doing it and the matter reported to the heads or fathers of the village, and he was brought before them and, after due consideration of the case, condemned to death. Such a decision must seem shocking to us and worthy of a semi-barbarous people. But if cruelty is the worst of all offences—and this was cruelty in its most horrid form—the offence which puts men down on a level with the worst of the mythical demons, it was surely a righteous deed to blot such an existence out lest other young minds should be contaminated, or even that it should be known that such a crime was possible.

All those birds that had finished rearing their young by the sixteenth of June were fortunate,

for on the morning of that day a great and continuous shouting, with gun-firing, banging on old brass and iron utensils, with various other loud, unusual noises, were heard at one extremity of the village, and continued with occasional quiet intervals until evening. This tempest of rude sounds spread from day to day, until the entire area of the village and the surrounding orchards was involved, and the poor birds that were tied to the spots where their treasures were must have existed in a state of constant trepidation. For now the cherries were fast ripening, and the fruit-eating birds, especially the thrushes and blackbirds, were inflamed at the gleam of crimson colour among the leaves. In the very large orchards men and boys were stationed all day long, yelling and firing off guns to frighten the marauders. In the smaller orchards the trees were decorated with whirligigs of coloured paper; ancient hats, among which were some of the quaintly shaped chimneypots of a past generation; old coats and waistcoats and trousers, and rags of all colours to flutter in the wind; and these objects were usually considered a sufficient protection. Some of the birds, wiser than their fellows, were not to be kept back by such simple means; but so long as they came not in bat-

talions, but singly, they could have their fill, and no notice was taken of them.

I was surprised to hear that on the large plantation the men employed were not allowed to use shot, the aim of the fruit-grower being only to scare the birds away. I had a talk with my old friend of the wryneck on the subject, and told him that I had seen one of the bird-scarers going home to his cottage very early in the morning, carrying a bunch of about a dozen blackbirds and thrushes he had just shot.

Yes, he replied, some of the men would buy shot and use it early in the morning before their master was about; but if the man I had seen had been detected in the act, he would have been discharged on the spot. It was not only because the trees would be injured by shot, but this fruit-grower was friendly to birds.

Most fruit-growers, I said, were dead against the birds, and anxious only to kill as many of them as possible.

It might be so in some places, he answered, but not in the village. He himself and most of the villagers depended, in a great measure, on the fruit they produced for a living, and their belief was that, taking one bird with another all

the year round, the birds did them more good than harm.

I then imparted to him the views on this bird subject of a well-known fruit-grower in the north of England, Mr. Joseph Witherspoon, of Chester-le-Street. He began by persecuting the birds, as he had been taught to do by his father, a market-gardener; but after years of careful observation he completely changed his views, and is now so convinced of the advantage that birds are to the fruit-grower, that he does all in his power to attract them, and to tempt them to breed in his grounds. His main idea is that birds that are fed on the premises, that live and feed among the trees, search for and attack the gardeners' enemies at every stage of their existence. At the same time he believes that it is very bad to grow fruit near woods, as in such a case the birds that live in the woods and are of no advantage to the garden, swarm into it as the fruit ripens, and that it is only by a liberal use of nets that any reasonable portion of the fruit can be saved.

He answered that with regard to the last point he did not quite agree with Mr. Witherspoon. All the gardens and orchards in the village were raided by the birds from the wood, yet he

reckoned they got as much fruit from their trees as others who had no woods near them. Then there was the big cherry plantation, one of the biggest in England, so that people came from all parts in the blossoming time just to look at it, and a wonderful sight it was. For a quarter of a mile this particular orchard ran parallel with the wood, with nothing but the green road between, and when the first fruit was ripening you could see all the big trees on the edge of the wood swarming with birds—jays, thrushes, blackbirds, doves, and all sorts of tits and little birds, just waiting for a chance to pounce down and devour the cherries. The noise kept them off, but many would dodge in, and even if a gun was fired close to them the blackbirds would snatch a cherry and carry it off to the wood. That didn't matter—a few cherries here and there didn't count. The starlings were the worst robbers: if you didn't scare them they would strip a tree and even an orchard in a few hours. But they were the easiest birds to deal with: they went in flocks, and a shout or rattle or report of a gun sent the lot of them away together. His way of looking at it was this. In the fruit season, which lasts only a few weeks, you are bound to suffer from the attacks of birds, whether they



are your own birds only or your own combined with others from outside, unless you keep them off; that those who do not keep them off are foolish or indolent, and deserve to suffer. The fruit season was, he said, always an anxious time.

In conclusion, I remarked that the means used for protecting the fruit, whether they served their purpose well or not, struck me as being very unworthy of the times we lived in, and seemed to show that the British fruit-growers, who were ahead of the world in all other matters connected with their vocation, had quite neglected this one point. A thousand years ago cultivators of the soil were scaring the birds from their crops just as we are doing, with methods no better and no worse, putting up scarecrows and old ragged garments and fluttering rags, hanging a dead crow to a stick to warn the others off, shouting and yelling and throwing stones. There appeared to be an opening here for experiment and invention. Mere noise was not terrifying to birds, and they soon discovered that an old hat on a stick had no injurious brains in or under it. But certain sounds and colours and odours had a strong effect on some animals. Sounds made to simulate the screams of some

hawks would perhaps prove very terrifying to thrushes and other small birds, and the effect of scarlet in large masses or long strips might be tried. It would also be worth while to try the effect of artificial sparrow-hawks and other birds of prey, perched conspicuously, moving and perking their tails at intervals by clockwork. In fact, a hundred things might be tried until something valuable was found, and when it lost its value—for the birds would in time discover the deception—some new plan adopted.

To this dissertation on what might be done, he answered that if anyone could find out or invent any new effective means to keep the birds from the fruit, the fruit-growers would be very thankful for it; but that no such invention could be looked for from those who are engaged on the soil, that it must come from those who do not dig and sweat, but sit still and work with their brains at new ideas.

This ended our conversation, and I left him more than satisfied at the information he had given me, and with a higher opinion than ever of his geniality and good practical sense.

It was a relief when the noisy, bird-scaring business was done with, and the last market baskets of ripe cherries were carried away to the

station. Very splendid they looked in such large masses of crimson, as the baskets were brought out and set down in the grassy road; but I could not help thinking a little sadly that the thrushes and blackbirds which had been surreptitiously shot, when fallen and fluttering in the wet grass in the early morning, had shed life-drops of that same beautiful colour.



## VII

AFTER the middle of June the common began to attract me more and more. It was so extensive that, standing on its border, just beyond the last straggling cottages and orchards, the further side was seen only as a line of blue trees, indistinct in the distance. As I grew to know it better, adding each day to my list from its varied bird life, the woods and waterside were visited less and less frequently, and after the bird-scaring noises began in the village, its wildness and quiet became increasingly grateful. The silence of nature was broken only by bird sounds, and the most frequent sound was that of the yellow bunting, as, perched motionless on the summit of a gorse bush, his yellow head conspicuous at a considerable distance, he emitted his thin monotonous chant at regular intervals, like a painted toy-bird that sings by machinery. There too, sedentary as an owl in the daytime, the corn bunting was common, discharging his brief song at intervals—a sound as of shattering glass.

The whinchat was rarely seen, but I constantly met the small, prettily-coloured stonechat flitting from bush to bush, following me and never ceasing his low, querulous, tacking chirp, anxious for the safety of his nest. Nightingales, black-caps, and whitethroats also nested there, and were louder and more emphatic in their protests when approached. There were several grasshopper-warblers on the common, all, very curiously as it seemed to me, clustered at one spot, so that one could ramble over miles of ground without hearing their singular note; but on approaching the place they inhabited one gradually became conscious of a mysterious trilling buzz or whirr, low at first and growing louder and more stridulous, until the hidden singers were left behind, when by degrees it sank lower and lower again, and ceased to be audible at a distance of about one hundred yards from the point where it had sounded loudest. The birds hid in clumps of furze and bramble so near together that the area covered by the buzzing sound measured about two hundred yards across. This most singular sound (for a warbler to make) is certainly not ventriloquial, although, if one comes to it with the sense of hearing disorganised by town noises or unpractised, one is at a

loss to determine the exact spot it comes from, or even to know from which side it comes. While emitting its prolonged sound the bird is so absorbed in its own performance that it is not easily alarmed, and will sometimes continue singing with a human listener standing within four or five yards of it. When one is near the bird, and listens, standing motionless, the effect on the nerves of hearing is very remarkable, considering the smallness of the sound, which, without being unpleasant, is somewhat similar to that produced by the vibration of the brake of a train; it is not powerful enough to jar the nerves, but appears to pervade the entire system. Lying still, with eyes closed, and three or four of these birds singing near, so that their strains overlap and leave no silent intervals, the listener can imagine that the sound originates within himself, that the numberless fine cords of his nervous network tremble responsively to it.

There are a number of natural sounds that resemble more or less closely the most unbird-like note of this warbler—cicada, rattlesnake, and some batrachians. Some grasshoppers perhaps come nearest to it; but the most sustained current of sound emitted by the insect is short compared to the warbler's strain, also the vibra-

tions are very much more rapid, and not heard as vibrations, and the same effect is not produced.

The grasshopper-warblers gave me so much pleasure that I was often at the spot where they had their little colony of about half a dozen pairs and where I discovered they bred every year. At first I used to go to any bush where I had caught sight of a bird, and sit down within a few yards of it and wait until the little hide-lings's shyness wore off and he would come out and start reeling. Afterwards I always went straight to the same bush, because I thought the bird that used it as his singing-place appeared less shy than the others. One day I spent a long time listening to this favourite, delightedly watching him, perched on a low twig on a level with my sight and not more than five yards from me; his body perfectly motionless, but the head and wide-open beak jerked from side to side in a measured mechanical way. I had a side view of the bird, but every three seconds the head would be jerked towards me, showing the bright yellow colour of the open mouth. The reeling would last about three minutes, then the bird would unbend or unstiffen and take a few hops about the bush, then stiffen and begin again. While thus gazing and listening I by chance met



with an experience of that rare kind which invariably strikes the observer of birds as strange and almost incredible—an example of the most perfect mimicry in a species which has its own distinctive song and is not a mimic except once in a while and as it were by chance. The marsh-warbler is our perfect mocking-bird, our one professional mimic, while the starling in comparison is but an amateur. We all know the starling's ever-varying performance in which he attempts a hundred things and occasionally succeeds; but even the starling sometimes affects us with a mild astonishment, and I will here give one instance.

I was staying at a village in the Wiltshire downs, and at intervals, while sitting at work in my room on the ground floor, I heard the cackling of a fowl at the cottage opposite. I heard, but paid no attention to that familiar sound; but after three days it all at once struck me that no fowl could lay an egg about every ten or twelve minutes and go on at this rate day after day, and, getting up, I went out to look for the cackler. A few hens were moving quietly about the open ground surrounding the cottage where the sound came from, but I heard nothing. By and by, when I was back in my room, the cackling

sounded again, but when I got out the sound had ceased and the fowls, as before, appeared quite unexcited. The only way to solve the mystery was to stand there out of doors for ten minutes, and before that time was over, a starling with a white grub in his beak flew down and perched on the low garden wall of the cottage, then, with some difficulty, squeezed himself through a small opening into a cavity under a strip of zinc which covered the bricks of the wall. It was a queer place for a starling's nest, on a wall three feet high and within two yards of the cottage door which stood open all day. Having delivered the grub, the starling came out again and, hopping on to the zinc, opened his beak and cackled like a hen, then flew away for more grubs.

I observed the starling a good deal after this, and found that invariably on leaving the nest he uttered his imitation of a fowl cackling, and no other note or sound of any kind. It was as if he was not merely imitating a sound, but had seen a fowl leaving the nest and then cackling, and mimicked the whole proceeding, and had kept up the habit after the young were hatched.

To return to my experience on the common. About fifty yards from the spot where I sat there was a dense thicket of furze and thorn,

with a huge mound in the middle composed of a tangle of whitethorn and bramble bushes mixed with ivy and clematis. From this spot, at intervals of half a minute or so, there issued the call of a duck—the prolonged, hoarse call of a drake, two or three times repeated, evidently emitted in distress. I conjectured that it came from one of a small flock of ducks belonging to a cottage near the edge of the common on that side. The flock, as I had seen, was accustomed to go some distance from home, and I supposed that one of them, a drake, had got into that brambly thicket and could not make his way out. For half an hour I heard the calls without paying much attention, absorbed in watching the quaint little songster close to me and his curious gestures when emitting his sustained reeling sounds. In the end the persistent distressed calling of the drake lost in a brambly labyrinth got a little on my nerves, and I felt it as a relief when it finally ceased. Then, after a short silence, another sound came from the same spot—a black-bird sound, known to every one, but curiously interesting when uttered in the way I now heard it. It was the familiar loud chuckle, not emitted in alarm and soon ended, but the chuckle uttered occasionally by the bird when he is not disturbed,

or when, after uttering it once for some real cause, he continues repeating it for no reason at all, producing the idea that he has just made the discovery that it is quite a musical sound and that he is repeating it, as if singing, just for pleasure. At such times the long series of notes do not come forth with a rush; he begins deliberately with a series of musical chirps uttered in a measured manner, like those of a wood-wren, the prelude to its song, the notes coming faster and faster and swelling and running into the loud chuckling performance. This performance, like the lost drake's call, was repeated in the same deliberate or leisurely manner at intervals again and again until my curiosity was aroused and I went to the spot to get a look at the bird who had turned his alarm sound into a song and appeared to be very much taken with it. But there was no blackbird at the spot, and no lost drake, and no bird except a thrush sitting motionless on the bush mound. This was the bird I had been listening to uttering not his own thrush melody, which he perhaps did not know at all, but the sounds he had borrowed from two species so wide apart in their character and language.

The astonishing thing in this case was that the

bird never uttered a note of his own original and exceedingly copious song; and I could only suppose that he had never learned the thrush melody, that he had perhaps been picked up as a fledgling and put in a cage, where he had imitated the sounds he heard and liked best and made them his song, and that he had finally escaped or had been liberated.

The wild thrush, we know, does introduce certain imitations into his own song, but the borrowed notes, or even phrases, are, as a rule, few and not always to be distinguished from his own. Sometimes one can pick them out; thus, on the borders of a marsh where redshanks bred, I have heard the call of that bird distinctly given by the thrush. And again, where the ring-ouzel is common, the thrush will get its brief song exactly.

When thrushes taken from the nest are reared in towns where they never hear the thrush or any other bird sing, they are often exceedingly vocal and utter a medley of sounds which are sometimes distressing to the ear. I have heard many caged thrushes of this kind in London, but the most remarkable instance I have met with was at the little seaside town of Seaford. Here in the main shopping street a caged thrush

lived for years in a butcher's shop, and poured out its song continuously, the most distressing thristle performance I ever heard, composed of a medley of loud, shrill, and harsh sounds—imitations of screams and shouts, boy whistlers, saw-filing, knives sharpened on steels, and numerous other unclassifiable noises, but all more or less painful. The whole street was filled with the noise, and the owner used to boast that his caged thrush was the most persistent as well as the loudest singer that had ever been heard. He had no nerves, and was proud of it! On a recent visit to Seaford I failed to hear the bird when walking about the town, and after two or three days went into the shop to enquire about it. They told me it was dead—that it had been dead over a year; also that many visitors to Seaford had missed its song and had called at the shop to ask about the bird. The strangest thing about its end, they said, was its suddenness. The bird was singing its loudest one morning and had been at it for some time, filling the whole place with its noise, when suddenly in the middle of its song it dropped down dead from its perch.

To drop dead while singing is not an unheard-of nor a very rare occurrence in caged birds, and it probably happens too in birds living their

natural life. Listening to a nightingale, pouring out its powerful music continuously, as the lark sings, one sometimes wonders that something does not give way to end the vocalist's performance and life at the same instant. Some such incident was probably the origin of the old legend of the minstrel and the nightingale on which Strada based his famous poem known in many languages. In England Crashaw's version is by far the best, and is perhaps the finest bird poem in our literature.

The blackbird, like the thrush, sometimes borrows a note or a phrase, and, like the thrush again, if reared by hand he may become a nuisance by mimicking some disagreeable sound and using it by way of song. I heard of such a case a short time ago at Sidmouth. The ground floor of the house where I lodged was occupied by a gentleman who had a fondness for bird music, and, being an invalid confined to his rooms, he kept a number of birds in cages. He had, besides canaries, the thrush, chaffinch, linnnet, goldfinch, and cirl bunting. I remarked that he did not have the best singer of all—the blackbird. He said that he had procured one, or that some friend had sent him one, a very beautiful ouzel cock in the blackest plumage and with

the orange-tawniest bill, and he had anticipated great pleasure from hearing its fluting melody. But alas! no blackbird song did this unnatural blackbird sing. He had learnt to bark like a dog, and whenever the singing spirit took him he would bark once or twice or three times, and then, after an interval of silence of the proper length, about fifteen seconds, he would bark again, and so on until he had had his fill of music for the time. The barking got on the invalid's nerves, and he sent the bird away. "It was either that," he said, "or losing my senses altogether."

As all or most singing birds learn their songs from the adults of the same species, it is not strange that there should be a good deal of what we call mimicry in their performances: we may say in fact that pretty well all the true singers are mimics, but that some mimic more than others. Thus, the starling is more ready to borrow other birds' notes than the thrush, while the marsh-warbler borrows so much that his singing is mainly composed of borrowings. The nightingale is perhaps an exception. His voice excels in power and purity of sound, and what we may call his artistry is exceptionally perfect; this may account for the fact that he does not borrow



from other birds' songs. I should say from my own observation that all songsters are interested in the singing of other species or at all events in certain notes, especially the most striking in power, beauty, and strangeness. Thus, when the cuckoo starts calling you will see other small birds fly straight to the tree and perch near him, apparently to listen. And among the listeners you will find the sparrow and tits of various species—birds which are never victimised by the cuckoo and do not take him for a hawk, since they take no notice of him until the calling begins. The reason that the double fluting call of the cuckoo is not mimicked by other birds is because they can't; because that peculiar sound is not in their register. The bubbling cry is reproduced by both the marsh-warbler and the starling. Again, it is my experience that when a nightingale starts singing, the small birds near immediately become attentive, often suspending their own songs and some flying to perch near him and listen, just as they listen to the cuckoo. Birds imitate the note or phrase that strikes them most and is easiest to imitate, as when the thrush copies the piping and trilling of the redshank and the easy song of the ring-ouzel which, when incorporated into his own music,

harmonises with it perfectly. But he cannot *flute*, and so never mimics the blackbird's song, although he can and does, as we have seen, imitate its chuckling cry.

There is another thing to be considered. I believe that the bird, like creatures in other classes, has his receptive periods, his time to learn, and that like some mammals he learns everything he needs to know in his first year or two; and that having acquired his proper song he adds little or nothing to it thereafter, although the song may increase in power and brilliance when the bird comes to full maturity. This, I think, holds true of all birds, like the nightingale, which have a singing period of two or three months and are songless for the rest of the year. That long silent period cannot, so far as sound goes, be a receptive one; the song early in life has become crystallised in the form it will keep through life, and is like an intuitive act. This is not the case with birds like the starling that sing all the year round—birds that are naturally loquacious and sing instead of screaming and chirping like others. They are always borrowing new sounds and always forgetting.

The most curious example of mimicry I have yet met with is that of a true mocking-bird,

*Mimus patachonicus*, a common resident species in northern Patagonia, on the Atlantic side, very abundant in places. He is a *true* mocking-bird because he belongs to the genus *Mimus*, a branch of the thrush family, and not because he mocks or mimics the songs of other species like others of his kindred. He does not, in fact, mimic the set songs of others, although he often introduces notes and phrases borrowed from other species into his own performance. He sings in a sketchy way all the year round, but in spring has a fuller, unbroken song, emitted with more power and passion. For the rest of the time he sings to amuse himself, as it seems, in a peculiarly leisurely and one may say indolent manner, perched on a bush, from time to time emitting a note or two, then a phrase which, if it pleases him, he will repeat two or three or half a dozen times; then, after a pause, other notes and phrases, and so on, pretty well all day long. This manner of singing is irritating, like the staccato song of our throstle, to a listener who wants a continuous stream of song; but it becomes exceedingly interesting when one discovers that the bird is thinking very much about his own music, if one can use such an expression about a bird; that he is all the time experimenting,

trying to get a new phrase, a new combination of the notes he knows and new notes. Also, that when sitting on his bush and uttering these careless chance sounds, he is at the same time intently listening to the others, all engaged in the same way, singing and listening. You will see them all about the place, each bird sitting motionless, like a grey and white image of a bird, on the summit of his own bush. For although he is not gregarious, as a rule a number of pairs live near each other and form a sort of loose community. The bond that unites them is their music, for not only do they sit within hearing distance but they are perpetually mimicking each other. One may say that they are accomplished mimics but prefer mimicking their own to other species. But they only imitate the notes that take their fancy, so to speak. Thus, occasionally one strikes out a phrase, a new expression, which appears to please him, and after a few moments he repeats it again, then again, and so on and on, and if you remain an hour within hearing he will perhaps be still repeating it at short intervals. Now if by chance there is something in the new phrase which pleases the listeners too, you will note that they instantly suspend their own singing, and for some little

time they do nothing but listen. By and by the new note or phrase will be exactly reproduced from a bird on another bush; and he too will begin repeating it at short intervals. Then a second one will get it, then a third, and eventually all the birds in that thicket will have it. The constant repeating of the new note may then go on for hours, and it may last longer. You may return to the spot on the second day and sit for an hour or longer listening and still hear that same note constantly repeated until you are sick and tired of it, or it may even get on your nerves. I remember that on one occasion I avoided a certain thicket, one of my favourite daily haunts, for three whole days, not to hear that one everlasting sound; then I returned, and to my great relief the birds were all at their old game of composing, and not one uttered—perhaps he didn't dare—the too hackneyed phrase.

I was sharply reminded one day, by an incident in the village, of this old Patagonian experience and of the strange human-like weakness or passion for something new and arresting in music or song, something "tuney" or "catchy."

It chanced that when I left London a new popular song had come out and was "all the rage," a tune and words invented or first pro-

duced in the music-halls by a woman named Lottie Collins, with a chorus to it—*Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay*—repeated several times. First caught up in the music-halls it spread to the streets, and in ever widening circles over all London and over all the land. In London people were getting tired of hearing it, but when I arrived at my village “in a hole” and settled down among the Badgers, I heard it on every hand; in cottages, in the streets, in the fields, men, women, and children were singing, whistling, and humming it, and in the evening at the inn roaring it out with as much zest as if they had been singing *Rule, Britannia*.

This state of things lasted from May to the middle of June; then, one very hot still day, about three o'clock, I was sitting at my cottage window when I caught the sound of a rumbling cart and a man singing. As the noise grew louder my interest in the approaching man and cart was excited to an extraordinary degree: never had I heard such a noise! And no wonder, since the man was driving a heavy springless farm cart in the most reckless manner, urging his two huge horses to a fast trot, then a gallop, up and down hill along those rough gully-like roads, he standing up in his cart and roaring out *Auld*

*Lang Syne* at the top of a voice of tremendous power. He was probably tipsy, but it was not a bad voice, and the old familiar tune and words had an extraordinary effect in that still atmosphere. He passed my cottage, standing up, his legs wide apart, his cap on the back of his head, a big broad-chested young man, lashing his horses, and then for about two minutes or longer the thunder of the cart and the roaring song came back fainter and fainter, until it faded away in the distance. At that still hour of the day the children were all at school on the further side of the village; the men away in the fields, the women shut up in their cottages, perhaps sleeping. It seemed to me that I was the only person in the village who had witnessed and heard the passing of the big-voiced man and cart. But it was not so. At all events next day the whole village, men, women, and children, were singing, humming, and whistling *Auld Lang Syne*, and *Auld Lang Syne* lasted for several days, and from that day *Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay* was heard no more. It had lost its charm.

## VIII

JUST out of hearing of the grasshopper-warblers there was a good-sized pool of water on the common, probably an old gravel-pit, its bottom now overgrown with rushes. A sedge-warbler, the only one on the common, lived in the masses of bramble and gorse on its banks; and birds of so many kinds came to it to drink and bathe that the pool became a favourite spot with me. One evening, just before sunset, as I lingered near it, a pied wagtail darted out of some low scrub at my feet and fluttered, as if wounded, over the turf for a space of ten or twelve yards before flying away. Not many minutes after seeing the wagtail, a reed-bunting—a bird which I had not previously observed on the common—flew down and alighted on a bush a few yards from me, holding a white crescent-shaped grub in its beak. I stood still to watch it, certainly not expecting to see its nest and young; for, as a rule, a bird with food in its beak will sit quietly until the watcher loses patience and moves away. But on this occasion I had not been standing



more than ten seconds before the bunting flew down to a small tuft of furze and was there greeted by the shrill welcoming cries of its young. I went up softly to the spot, when out sprang the old bird I had seen, but only to drop to the ground just as the wagtail had done, to beat the turf with its wings, then to lie gasping for breath, then to flutter on a little further, until at last it rose up and flew to a bush.

After admiring the reed-bunting's action, I turned to the dwarf bush near to my feet, and saw, perched on a twig in its centre, a solitary young bird, fully fledged but not yet capable of sustained flight. He did not recognise an enemy in me; on the contrary, when I approached my hand to him he opened his yellow mouth wide in expectation of being fed, although his throat was crammed with caterpillars, and the white crescent-shaped larva I had seen in the parent's bill was still lying in his mouth unswallowed. The wonder is that when a young bird has been stuffed with food to such an extent just before sleeping time, he can still find it in him to open his mouth and call for more.

. . . . .

How wonderful it is that this parental instinct,

so beautiful in its perfect simulation of the action of a bird that has lost the power of flight, should be found in so large a number of species! But when we find that it is not universal; that in two closely allied species one will possess it and the other not; and that it is common in such widely separated orders as gallinaceous and passerine birds, in pigeons, ducks, and waders, it becomes plain that it is not assignable to community of descent, but has originated independently all over the globe, in a vast number of species. Something of the beginnings and progressive development of this instinct may be learnt, I think, by noticing the behaviour of various passerine birds in the presence of danger to their nests and young. Their actions and cries show that they are greatly agitated, and in a majority of species the parent bird flits and flutters round the intruder, uttering sounds of distress. Frequently the bird exhibits its agitation not only by these cries and restless motions, but by the drooping of the wings and tail—the action observed in a bird when hurt or sick or oppressed with heat. These languishings are common to a great many species after the young have been hatched, the period when the parental solicitude is most intense. In several species

which I have observed in South America the languishing is more marked. There are no sorrowful cries and restless movements; the bird sits with hanging wings and tail, gasping for breath with open bill—in appearance a greatly suffering bird. In some cases of this description the bird, if it moves at all, hops or flutters from a higher to a lower branch, and, as if sick or wounded, seems about to sink to the ground. In still others the bird actually does drop to the ground, then, feebly flapping its wings, rises again with great effort. From this last form it is but a step to the more highly developed complex instinct of the bird that sinks to the earth and flutters painfully away, gasping, and seemingly incapable of flight.

It would be a great mistake to suppose that the bird, when fluttering on the ground to lead an enemy from the neighbourhood of its nest, is in full possession of all its faculties, acting consciously, and itself in as little danger of capture as when on its perch or flying through the air. We have seen that the action has its root in the bird's passion for its young, and intense solicitude in the presence of any danger threatening them, which is so universal in this class of creatures, and which expresses itself so variously in different

kinds. This must be in all cases a painful and debilitating emotion, and when the bird drops down to the earth its pain has caused it to fall as surely as if it had received a wound or had been suddenly attacked by some grievous malady; and when it flutters on the ground it is for the moment incapable of flight, and its efforts to recover flight and safety cause it to beat its wings, and tremble, and gasp with open mouth. The object of the action is to deceive an enemy, or, to speak more correctly, the result is to deceive; and there is nothing that will more inflame and carry away any rapacious mammal than the sight of a fluttering bird. But in thus drawing upon itself the attention of an enemy threatening the safety of its eggs or young, to what a terrible danger does the parent expose itself, and how often, in those moments of agitation and debility, must its own life fall a sacrifice! The sudden spring and rush of a feline enemy must have proved fatal in myriads of instances. From its inception to its most perfect stage, in the various species that possess it, this perilous instinct has been washed in blood and made bright.

What I have just said, that the peculiar instinct and deceptive action we have been considering is made and kept bright by being bathed in blood,

applies to all instinctive acts that tend to the preservation of life, both of the individual and species. Necessarily so, seeing that, for one thing, instinct can only arise and grow to perfection in order to meet cases which commonly occur in the life of a species. The instinct is not prophetic and does not meet rare or extraordinary situations. Unless intelligence or some higher faculty comes in to supplement or take the place of instinctive action, then the creature must perish on account of the limitation of instinct. Again, the higher and more complete the instinct the more perilous it is, seeing that its efficiency depends on the absolutely perfect health and balance of all the faculties and the entire organism. Thus, the highest instinctive faculty and action of birds for the preservation of the species, that of migration, is undoubtedly the most dangerous of all. It is so perfect that by means of this faculty millions and myriads of birds of an immense variety of species, from cranes, swans, and geese down to minute goldcrests and firecrests and the smallest feeble-winged leaf-warblers, are able to inhabit and to distribute themselves evenly over all the temperate and cold regions of the earth, and even nearer the pole: and in all these regions they rear their young and spend

several months each year, where they would inevitably perish from cold and lack of food if they stayed on to meet the winter. We can best realise the perfection of this instinct when we consider that all these migrants, including the young which have never hitherto strayed beyond the small area of their home where every tree and bush and spring and rock is familiar to them, rush suddenly away as if blown by a wind to unknown lands and continents beyond the seas to a distance of from a thousand to six or seven thousand miles; that after long months spent in those distant places which in turn have grown familiar to them, they return again to their natal place, not in a direct but oftentimes by a devious route, now north, now north-east, now east or west, keeping to the least perilous lines and crossing the seas where they are narrowest. Thus, when the returning multitude recrosses the Channel into England, coming by way of France and Spain from north or south or mid Africa and from Asia, they at once proceed to disperse over the entire country from Land's End to Thurso and the northernmost islands of Scotland, until every wood and hill and moor and thicket and stream, and every village and field and hedgerow and farm-house has its own

feathered people back in their old places. But they do not return in their old force. They had increased to twice or three times their original numbers when they left us, and as a result of that great adventure a half or two-thirds of the vast army has perished.

The instinct which in character comes nearest to that of the parent simulating the action of a wounded and terrified bird struggling to escape in order to safeguard its young, is that one, very strong in all ground-breeding species, of sitting close on the nest in the presence of danger. Here too the instinct is of prime importance to the species, since the bird by quitting the nest reveals its existence to the prowling nest-seeking enemy—dog, cat, fox, stoat, rat in England, and, in the country where I first observed animals, the skunk, armadillo, opossum, snake, wild cat, and animals of the weasel family. By leaving its nest a minute or half a minute too soon the bird sacrifices the eggs or young; by staying a moment too long it is in imminent danger of being destroyed itself. How often the bird stays too long on the nest is seen in the corncrake, a species continually decreasing in this country owing to the destruction caused by the mowing machine. The parent bird that escapes may

breed again in a safer place, but in many cases the bird clings too long to its nest and is decapitated or fatally injured by the cutters. Larks, too, often perish in the same way.

To go back to the ailing or wounded bird simulating action. This is perhaps most perfect in the gallinaceous birds, all ground-breeders whose nests are most diligently hunted for by all egg-eating creatures, beast or bird, and whose tender chicks are a favourite of all rapacious animals. In the fowl, pheasants, partridges, quail, and grouse, the instinct is singularly powerful, the bird making such violent efforts to escape, with such an outcry, such beating of its wings and struggles on the ground, that no rapacious beast, however often he may have been deceived before, can fail to be carried away with the prospect of an immediate capture. The instinct and action has appeared to me more highly developed in these birds because in the first place the demonstrations are more violent than in other families, consequently more effective; and secondly because, the danger once over, the bird's recovery to its normal quiet watchful state is quicker. By way of experiment I have at various times thrown myself on pheasants, partridges, and grouse, when I have found



them with a family of recently hatched chicks; then, on giving up the chase and turning away from the bird, its instantaneous recovery has seemed like a miracle. It was like a miracle because the creature did actually suffer from all those violent debilitating emotions expressed in its disordered cries and action, and it is the miracle of Nature's marvellous health. If we, for example, were thrown into these violent extremes of passion we should not escape the after effects. Our whole system would suffer, a doctor would perhaps have to be called in and would discourse wisely on metabolism and the development of toxins in the muscles and give us a bottle of medicine.

I will conclude this digression and dissertation on a bird's instinct by relating the action of a hen pheasant I once witnessed, partly because it is the most striking one I have met with of that instantaneous recovery of a bird from an extremity of distress and terror, and partly for another reason which will appear at the end.

The hen pheasant was a solitary bird, having strayed away from the pheasant copses near the Itchen and found a nesting-place a mile away, on the other side of the valley, among the tall grasses and sedges on its border. I was the bird's

only human neighbour, as I was staying in a fishing-cottage near the spot where the bird had its nest. Eventually it brought off eight chicks and remained with them at the same spot on the edge of the valley, living like a rail among the sedges and tall valley herbage. I never went near the bird, but from the cottage caught sight of it from time to time, and sometimes watched it with my binocular. There was, I thought, a good chance of its being able to rear its young, unless the damp proved injurious, as there was no dog or cat at the cottage, and there were no carrion crows or sparrow-hawks at that spot. One morning about five o'clock on going out I spied a fox-terrier, a poaching dog from the neighbouring village, rushing about in an excited state a hundred yards or so below the cottage. He had scented the birds, and presently up rose the hen from the tall grass with a mighty noise, then flopping down she began beating her wings and struggling over the grass, uttering the most agonising screams, the dog after her, frantically grabbing at her tail. I feared that he would catch her, and seizing a stick flew down to the rescue, yelling at the dog, but he was too excited to obey or even hear me. At length, thanks to the devious course taken by the bird,

I got near enough to get in a good blow on the dog's back. He winced and went on as furiously as ever, and then I got in another blow so well delivered that the rascal yelled and, turning, fled back to the village. Hot and panting from my exertions I stood still, but sooner still the pheasant had pulled herself up and stood there, about three yards from my feet, as if nothing had happened—as if not a ripple had troubled the quiet surface of her life! The serenity of the bird, just out of that storm of violence and danger, and her perfect indifference to my presence, was astonishing to me. For a minute or two I stood still watching her, then turned to walk back to the cottage, and no sooner did I start than after me she came at a gentle trot, following me like a dog. On my way back I came to the very spot where the fox-terrier had found and attacked the bird, and at once on reaching it she came to a stop and uttered a call, and instantly from eight different places among the tall grasses the eight fluffy little chicks popped up and started running to her. And there she stood gathering them about her with gentle chucklings, taking no notice of me, though I was standing still within two yards of her!

Up to the moment when the dog got his smart

blow and fled from her she had been under the domination of a powerful instinct and could have acted in no other way; but what guided her so infallibly in her subsequent actions? Certainly not instinct, and not reason which hesitates between different courses and is slow to arrive at a decision. One can only say that it was, or was like, intuition, which is as much as to say that we don't know.



## IX

AMONG the rarer fringilline birds on the common were the ciril bunting, bullfinch, and goldfinch, the last two rarely seen. Linnets however were abundant, now gathered in small flocks composed mainly of young birds in plain plumage, with here and there an individual showing the carmine-tinted breast of the adult male. Unhappily a dreary fate was in store for many of these blithe twitterers.

On June 24, when walking towards the pool, I spied two recumbent human figures on a stretch of level turf near its banks, and near them a something dark on the grass—a pair of clap-nets! “Still another serpent in my birds’ paradise!” said I to myself, and, walking on, I skirted the nets and sat down on the grass beside the men. One was a rough brown-faced country lad; the other, who held the strings and wore the usual cap and comforter, was a man of about five-and-twenty, with pale blue eyes and yellowish hair, close cropped, and the unmistak-

able London mark in his chalky complexion. He regarded me with cold suspicious looks, and, when I talked and questioned, answered briefly and somewhat surlily. I treated him to tobacco, and he smoked; but it wasn't shag, and didn't soften him. On mentioning casually that I had seen a stoat an hour before, he exhibited a sudden interest. It was as if one had said "rats!" to a terrier. I succeeded after a while in getting him to tell me the name of the man to whom he sent his captives, and when I told him that I knew the man well—a bird-seller in a low part of London—he thawed visibly. Finally I asked him to look at a red-backed shrike, perched on a bush about fifteen yards from his nets, through my field glasses, and from that moment he became as friendly as possible, and conversed freely about his mystery. "How near it brings him!" he exclaimed, with a grin of delight, after looking at the bird. The shrike had greatly annoyed him; it had been hanging about for some time, he told me, dashing at the linnets and driving them off when they flew down to the nets. Two or three times he might have caught it, but would not draw the nets and have the trouble of resetting them for so worthless a bird. "But I'll take him next time," he said vindictively. "I

didn't know he was such a handsome bird." Unfortunately the shrike soon flew away, and passing linnets dropped down, drawn to the spot by the twitterings of their caged fellows, and were caught; and so it went on for a couple of hours, we conversing amicably during the waiting intervals. For now he regarded me as a friend of the bird-catcher. Linnets only were caught, most of them young birds, which pleased him; for the young linnet after a month or two of cage life will sing; but the adult males would be silent until the next spring, consequently they were not worth so much, although the carmine stain in their breast made them for the time so much more beautiful.

I remarked incidentally that there were some who looked with unfriendly eyes on his occupation, and that, sooner or later, these people would try to get an Act of Parliament to make bird-catching in lanes and on commons and waste lands illegal. "They can't do it!" he exclaimed excitedly. "And if they can do it, and if they do do it, it will be the ruination of England. For what would there be then to stop the birds increasing? It stands to reason that the whole country would be eaten up."

Doubtless the man really believed that but for

the laborious days that bird-catchers spend lying on the grass, the human race would be very badly off.

Just after he had finished his protest three or four linnets flew down and were caught. Taking them from the nets, he showed them to me, remarking, with a short laugh, that they were all young males. Then he thrust them down the stocking-leg which served as an entrance to the covered box he kept his birds in—the black hole in which their captive life begins, where they were now all vainly fluttering to get out. Going back to the previous subject, he said that he knew very well that many persons disliked a bird-catcher, but there was one thing that nobody could say against him—he wasn't cruel; he caught, but didn't kill. He only killed when he caught a great number of female linnets, which were not worth sending up: he pulled their heads off and took them home to make a linnet pie. Then, by way of contrast to his own merciful temper, he told me of the young nest-destroyer I have written about. It made him mad to see such things! Something ought to be done, he said, to stop a boy like that; for by destroying so many nestlings he was taking the bread out of the bird-catcher's mouth. Passing



to other subjects, he said that so far he had caught nothing but linnets on the common—you couldn't expect to catch other kinds in June. Later on, in August and September, there would be a variety. But he had small hopes of catching goldfinches, they were too scarce now. Greenfinches, yellowhammers, common buntings, reed sparrows—all such birds were worth only tuppence apiece. Oh, yes, he caught them just the same, and sent them up to London, but that was all they were worth to him. For young male linnets he got eightpence, sometimes tenpence; for hen birds fourpence, or less. I dare say that eightpence was what he hoped to get, seeing that young male linnets are not unfrequently sold by London dealers for sixpence and even fourpence. Goldfinches ran to eighteenpence, sometimes as much as two shillings. Starlings he had made a lot out of, but that was all past and over. Why? Because they were not wanted—because people were such fools that they now preferred to shoot at pigeons. He hated pigeons! Gentlemen used to shoot starlings at matches; and if you had the making of a bird to shoot at, you couldn't get a better than the starling—such a neat bird! He had caught hundreds—thousands—and had sold them well.

But now nothing but pigeons would they have. Pigeons! always pigeons! He caught starlings still, but what was the good of that? The dealers would only take a few, and they were worth nothing—no more than greenfinches and yellow-hammers.

. . . . .

My colloquy with my enemy on the common tempts me to a fresh digression in this place—to have my say on a question about which much has already been said during the last three or four decades, especially during the sixties, when the first practical efforts to save our wild bird life from destruction were made.

There is a feeling in the great mass of people that the pursuit of any wild animal, whether fit for food or not, for pleasure or gain, is a form of sport, and that sport ought not to be interfered with. So strong and well-nigh universal is this feeling, which is like a superstition, that the pursuit is not interfered with, however unsportsmanlike it may be, and when illegal, and when practised by only a very few persons in any district, where to others it may be secretly distasteful or even prejudicial.

Even bird-catching on a common is regarded

as a form of sport, and the bird-catcher as a sportsman—and a brother.

A striking instance of this tameness and stupidly acquiescent spirit in people generally was witnessed during the intensely severe frosts of the early part of the late winter (1882-3), when incalculable numbers of sea-birds were driven by hunger and cold into bays and inland waters. At this time thousands of gulls made their appearance in the Thames, but no sooner did they arrive than those who possessed guns and licences to shoot began to shoot them. The police interfered, and some of these sportsmen were brought before the magistrates and fined for the offence of discharging guns to the public danger. For upwards of a fortnight after the shooting had been put a stop to, the gulls continued to frequent the river in large numbers, and were perhaps most numerous from London Bridge to Battersea, and during this time they were watched every day by thousands of Londoners with keen interest and pleasure. The river here, flowing through the very centre and heart of the greatest city of the world, forms at all hours and at all seasons of the year a noble and magnificent sight; to my eyes it never looked more beautiful and wonderful than during those intensely cold

days of January, when there was nothing that one could call a mist in the chilly motionless atmosphere, but only a faint haze, a pallor as of impalpable frost, which made the heavens seem more white than blue, and gave a hoariness and cloud-like remoteness to the arches spanning the water, and the vast buildings on either side, ending with the sublime dome of the city cathedral; and when out of the pale motionless haze, singly, in twos and threes, in dozens and scores, floated the mysterious white bird-figures; first seen like vague shadows in the sky, then quickly taking shape and whiteness, and floating serenely past, to be succeeded by others and yet others.

It was not merely the ornithologist in me that made the sight so fascinating, since it was found that others—*all* others, it might almost be said—experienced the same kind of delight. Crowds of people came down to the river to watch the birds; workmen when released from their work at midday hurried down to the embankment so as to enjoy seeing the gulls while eating their dinners, and, strangest thing of all, to feed them with the fragments!

And yet these very men who found so great a pleasure in observing and feeding their white visitors from the sea, and were exhilarated with

the novel experience of seeing wild nature face to face at their own doors—these thousands would have stood by silent and consenting if the half-dozen scoundrels with guns and fish hooks on lines had been allowed to have their will and had slaughtered and driven the birds from the river! And this, in fact, is precisely what happened at a distance from London, where guns could be discharged without danger to the public, in numberless bays and rivers in which the birds sought refuge. They were simply slaughtered wholesale in the most wanton manner; in Morecambe Bay a hundred and twelve gulls were killed at one discharge, and no hand and no voice was raised to interfere with the hideous sport. Not because it was not shocking to the spectators, but because it was “Sport.”

Doubtless it will be said that this wholesale wanton destruction of bird life, however painful it may be to lovers of nature, however reprehensible from a moral point of view, is sanctioned by law, and cannot therefore be prevented. This is not quite so. We see that the Wild Birds Protection Act is continually being broken with impunity, and where public opinion is unfavourable to it the guardians of the law themselves, the police and the magistrates, are found en-

couraging the people to break the law. Again, we find that where commons are enclosed, and the law says nothing, the people are accustomed to assemble together unlawfully to tear the fences down, and are not punished. For, after all, if laws do not express or square with public will or opinion, they have little force; and if, in any locality, the people thought proper to do so—if they were not restrained by that dull tame spirit I have spoken of—they would, lawfully or unlawfully, protect their sea-fowl from the cockney sportsmen, and sweep the bird-catchers out of their lanes and waste lands.

One day I paid a visit to Maidenhead, a pleasant town on the Thames, where the Thames is most beautiful, set in the midst of a rich and diversified country which should be a birds' paradise. In my walks in the town, I saw a great many stuffed kingfishers, and, in the shops of the local taxidermists, some rare and beautiful birds, with others that are fast becoming rare. But outside of the town I saw no kingfishers and no rare species at all, and comparatively few birds of any kind. It might have been a town of Philistine cockneys who at no very distant period had emigrated thither from the parish of

St. Giles-in-the-Fields. I came home with the local guide-book in my pocket. It is now before me, and this is what its writer says of the Thicket, the extensive and beautiful common two miles from the town, which belongs to Maidenhead, or, in other words, to its inhabitants:—"The Thicket was formerly much infested by robbers and highwaymen. The only remains of them to be found now are the snarers of the little feathered songsters, who imprison them in tiny cages and carry them off in large numbers to brighten by their sweet sad sighs for liberty the dwellers in our smoky cities."

On this point I consulted a bird-catcher, who had spread his nets on the common for many years, and he complained bitterly of the increasing scarcity of its bird life. There was no better place than the Thicket formerly, he said; but now he could hardly make his bread there. I presume that a dozen men of his trade would be well able to drain the country in the neighbourhood of the Thicket of the greater portion of its bird life each year so as to keep the songsters scarce. Will any person maintain for a moment that the eight or nine thousand inhabitants of Maidenhead, and the hundreds or thousands inhabiting the surrounding country could not

protect their song-birds from these few men, most of them out of London slums, if they wished or had the spirit to do so?

It is true that the local authorities in some country towns have made bye-laws to protect the birds in their open spaces. Thus, at Tunbridge Wells, since 1890, bird-trapping and birds'-nesting have been prohibited on the large and beautiful common there; but, so far as I know, such measures have only been taken in boroughs after the birds have been almost exterminated.

Doubtless the day will come when, law or no law, the bird-catcher will find it necessary to go "war" against the people of any place where he is. One who attempted to spread his nets should have learned the custom of treating those of his calling somewhat roughly. That it will come soon is earnestly to be wished. Nevertheless, it would be irrational to cherish feelings of animosity and hatred against the bird-catcher himself, the "man and brother," ready and anxious as we may be to take the bread out of his mouth. He certainly does not regard himself as an injurious or disreputable person; on the contrary, he looks on himself as a useful member of the community, and in some cases even more. If anyone is to be hated or blamed, it is the person



who sends the bird-catcher into the fields; not the dealer, but he who buys trapped birds and keeps them in cages to be amused by their twit-terings. This is not a question of morality, nor of sentimentality, as some may imagine; but rather of taste, of the sense of fitness, of that something vaguely described as the feeling for nature, which is not universal. Thus, one man will dine with zest on a pheasant, partridge, or quail, but would be choked by a lark; while another man will eat pheasant and lark with equal pleasure. Both may be good, honest, moral men; only one has that something which the other lacks. In one the soul responds to the skylark's music "singing at heaven's gate," the other not; to one the roasted lark is merely a savoury morsel; the other, be he never so hungry, cannot dissociate the bird on the dish from that heavenly melody which registered a sensation in his brain, to be thereafter reproduced at will, together with the revived emotion. It is a curious question, and is no nearer to a settlement when one of these two I have described turns round and calls his neighbour a gross feeder, a worshipper of his belly, a soulless and brutish man; and when the other answers "pooh-pooh" and goes on complacently

devouring larks with great gusto, until he is himself devoured of death.

To those with whom I am in sympathy in this matter, who love to listen to and are yearly invigorated by the skylark's music, and whose souls are yearly sickened at the slaughter of their loved songsters, I would humbly suggest that there is a simpler, more practical means of ending this dispute, which has surely lasted long enough. It goes without saying that this bird's music is eminently pleasing to most persons, that even as the sunshine is sweet and pleasant to behold, its silvery aerial sounds rained down so abundantly from heaven are delightful and exhilarating to all of us, or, at all events, to so large a majority that the minority are not entitled to consideration. One person in five thousand, or perhaps in ten thousand, might be found to say that the lark singing in blue heaven affords him no pleasure. This being so, and ours being a democratic country in which the will or desire of the many is or may be made the law of the land, it is surely only right and reasonable that lovers of lark's flesh should be prevented from gratifying their taste at the cost of the destruction of so loved a bird; that they should be made to content themselves with woodcock, and snipe on

toast, and golden plover, and grouse and black-cock, and any other bird of delicate flavour which does not, living, appeal so strongly to the æsthetic feelings in us, and is not so universal a favourite.

This, too, will doubtless come in time. Speaking for myself, and going back to the former subject, little as I like to see men feeding on larks, rather would I see larks killed and eaten than thrust into cages. For in captivity they do not "sweeten" my life, as the Maidenhead guide-book writer would say, with their shrill piercing cries for liberty, but they "sing me mad." Just as in some minds this bird's music—a sound which above all others typifies the exuberant life and joy of nature to the soul—cannot be separated from the cooked and dished-up melodist, so that they turn with horror from such meat, so I cannot separate this bird, nor any bird, from the bird's wild life of liberty, and the marvellous faculty of flight which is the bird's attribute. To see so wild and aerial a creature in a cage jars my whole system, and is a sight hateful and unnatural, an outrage on our universal mother.

This feeling about birds in captivity, which I have attempted to describe, and which, I repeat, is not sentimentality, as that word is ordinarily

understood, has been so vividly rendered in an ode to *The Skylarks*, by Sir Rennell Rodd, that the reader will probably feel grateful to me for quoting a portion of it in this place, especially as the volume in which it appears—*Feda, with other Poems*—is, I imagine, not very widely known:

Oh, the sky, the sky, the open sky,  
     For the home of a song-bird's heart!  
 And why, and why, and for ever why,  
     Do they stifle here in the mart:

Cages of agony, rows on rows,  
 Torture that only a wild thing knows:  
     Is it nothing to you to see  
 That head thrust out through the hopeless wire,  
 And the tiny life, and the mad desire  
     To be free, to be free, to be free?  
 Oh, the sky, the sky, the blue, wide sky,  
     For the beat of a song-bird's wings!

. . . . .

Straight and close are the cramping bars  
 From the dawn of mist to the chill of stars,  
     And yet it must sing or die!  
 Will its marred harsh voice in the city street  
     Make any heart of you glad?  
 It will only beat with its wings and beat,  
     It will only sing you mad.

. . . . .

If it does not go to your heart to see  
The helpless pity of those bruised wings,  
The tireless effort to which it clings  
To the strain and the will to be free,  
I know not how I shall set in words  
The meaning of God in this,  
For the loveliest thing in this world of His  
Are the ways and the songs of birds.  
But the sky, the sky, the wide, free sky,  
For the home of the song-bird's heart!

How falsely does that man see nature, how grossly ignorant must he be of its most elemental truths, who looks upon it as a chamber of torture, a physiological laboratory on a very vast scale, a scene of endless strife and trepidation, of hunger and cold, and every form of pain and misery—and who, holding this doctrine of Nature's cruelty, keeps a few captive birds in cages, and is accustomed to say of them, these at any rate are safe, rescued from subjection to ruthless conditions, sheltered from the inclement weather and from enemies, and all their small wants abundantly satisfied; who once or twice every day looks at his little captives, presents them with a lump of sugar, whistles and chuckles to provoke them to sing, then goes about his business, flattering himself that he is a lover of birds, a being of a sweet and kindly nature. It

is all a delusion, a distortion and inversion of the truth, so absurd that it would be laughable were it not so sad, and the cause of so much unconscious cruelty. The truth is that if birds be capable of misery, it is only in the unnatural conditions of a caged life that they experience it; and that if they be capable of happiness in a cage, such happiness or contentment is but a poor pale emotion compared with the wild exuberant gladness they have in freedom, where all their instincts have full play, and where the perils that surround them do but brighten their many splendid faculties. The little bird twitters and sings in its cage, and among ourselves the blind man and the cripple whistle and sing too, feeling at times a lower kind of contentment and cheerfulness. The chaffinch in East London, with its eyeballs seared by red-hot needles, sings too in its prison, when it has grown accustomed to its darkened existence, and is in health, and the agreeable sensations that accompany health prompt it at intervals to melody; but no person, not even the dullest ruffian among the baser sort of bird-fanciers, would maintain for a moment that the happiness of the little sightless captive, whether vocal or silent, is at all comparable in degree to that of the chaffinch singing in April

“on the orchard bough,” vividly seeing the wide sunlit world, blue above and green below, possessing the will and the power, when its lyric ends, to transport itself swiftly through the crystal fields of air to other trees and other woods.

I take it that in the lower animals misery can result from two causes only—restraint and disease: consequently, that animals in a state of nature are not miserable. They are not hindered nor held back. Whether the animal is migrating, or burying himself in his hibernating nest or den; or flying from some rapacious enemy, which he may or may not be able to escape; or feeding, or sleeping, or fighting, or courting, or incubating, however many days or weeks this process may last—in all things he is obeying the impulse that is strongest in him at the time—he is doing what he wants to do, the one thing that makes him happy.

As to disease, it is so rare in wild animals, or in a large majority of cases so quickly proves fatal, that, compared with what we call disease in our own species, it is practically non-existent. The “struggle for existence,” in so far as animals in a state of nature are concerned, is a metaphorical struggle; and the strife, short and sharp, which is so common in nature, is not misery,

although it results in pain, since it is pain that kills or is soon outlived. Fear there is, just as in fine weather there are clouds in the sky; and just as the shadow of the cloud passes, so does fear pass from the wild creature when the object that excited it has vanished from sight. And when death comes, it comes unexpectedly, and is not the death that we know, even before we taste of it, thinking of it with apprehension all our lives long, but a sudden blow that takes away consciousness—the touch of something that numbs the nerves—merely the prick of a needle. In whatever way the animal perishes, whether by violence, or excessive cold, or decay, his death is a comparatively easy one. So long as he is fighting with or struggling to escape from an enemy, wounds are not felt as wounds, and scarcely hurt him—as we know from our own experience; and when overcome, if death be not practically instantaneous, as in the case of a small bird seized by a cat, the disabling grip or blow is itself a kind of anodyne, producing insensibility to pain. This, too, is a matter of human experience. To say nothing of those who fall in battle, men have often been struck down and fearfully lacerated by lions, tigers, jaguars, and other savage beasts; and, after having been



rescued by their companions, have recounted this strange thing. Even when there was no loss of consciousness, when they saw and knew that the animal was rending their flesh, they seemed not to feel it, and were, at the time, indifferent to the fate that had overtaken them.

It is the same in death from cold. The strong, well-nourished man, overtaken by a snowstorm on some pathless, uninhabited waste, may experience some exceedingly bitter moments, or even hours, before he gives up the struggle. The physical pain is simply nothing; the whole bitterness is in the thought that he must die. The horror at the thought of annihilation, the remembrance of all the happiness he is now about to lose, of dear friends, of those whose lives will be dimmed with grief for his loss, of all his cherished dreams of the future—the sting of all this is so sharp that, compared with it, the creeping coldness in his blood is nothing more than a slight discomfort, and is scarcely felt. By and by he is overcome by drowsiness, and ceases to struggle; the torturing visions fade from his mind, and his only thought is to lie down and sleep. And when he sleeps he passes away; very easily, very painlessly, for the pain was of the mind, and was over long before death ensued.

The bird, however hard the frost may be, flies briskly to his customary roosting-place, and, with beak tucked into his wing, falls asleep. He has no apprehensions; only the hot blood grows colder and colder, the pulse feebler as he sleeps, and at midnight, or in the early morning, he drops from his perch—dead.

Yesterday he lived and moved, responsive to a thousand external influences, reflecting earth and sky in his small brilliant brain as in a looking-glass; also he had a various language, the inherited knowledge of his race, and the faculty of flight, by means of which he could shoot, meteor-like, across the sky, and pass swiftly from place to place; and with it such perfect control over all his organs, such marvellous certitude in all his motions, as to be able to drop himself plumb down from the tallest tree-top or out of the void air, on to a slender spray, and scarcely cause its leaves to tremble. Now, on this morning, he lies stiff and motionless; if you were to take him up and drop him from your hand, he would fall to the ground like a stone or a lump of clay—so easy and swift is the passage from life to death in wild nature! But he was never miserable.

Those of my readers who have seen much of

animals in a state of nature, will agree that death from decay, or old age, is very rare among them. In that state the fullest vigour, with brightness of all the faculties, is so important that probably in ninety-nine cases in a hundred any falling off in strength, or decay of any sense, results in some fatal accident. Death by misadventure, as we call it, is Nature's ordinance, the end designed for a very large majority of her children. Nevertheless, animals do sometimes live on without accident to the very end of their term, to fade peacefully away at the last. I have myself witnessed such cases in mammals and birds; and one such case, which profoundly impressed me, and is vividly remembered, I will describe. One morning in the late summer, while walking in the fields at my home in South America, I noticed a few purple martins, large, beautiful swallows common in that region, engaged, at a considerable height, in the aerial exercises in which they pass so much of their time each day. By and by one of the birds separated itself from the others, and, circling slowly downward, finally alighted on the ground not far from me. I walked on; but the action of the bird had struck me as unusual and strange, and before going far, I turned and walked back to the spot where it

continued sitting on the ground, quite motionless. It made no movement when I approached to within four yards of it; and after I had stood still at that distance for a minute or so, attentively regarding it, I saw it put out one wing and turn over on its side. I at once took it up in my hand, and found that it was already quite dead. It was a large example of its species, and its size, together with a something of dimness in the glossy purple colour of the upper plumage, seemed to show that it was an old bird. But it was uninjured, and when I dissected it no trace of disease was discernible. I concluded that it was an old bird that had died solely from natural failure of the life-energy.

But how wonderful, how almost incredible, that the healthy vigour and joy of life should have continued in this individual bird down to within so short a period of the end; that it should have been not only strong enough to find its food, but to rush and wheel about for long intervals in purely sportive exercises, when the brief twilight of decline and final extinction were so near! It becomes credible—we can even believe that most of the individuals that cease to exist only when the vital fire has burnt itself out, fall on death in this swift, easy manner—

when we recall the fact that even in the life-history of men such a thing is not unknown. Probably there is not one among my readers who will not be able to recall some such incident in his own circle—the case of some one who lived, perhaps, long past the term usually allotted to man, and who finally passed away without a struggle, without a pang, so that those who were with him found it hard to believe that the spirit had indeed gone. In such cases the subject has invariably been healthy, although it is hard to believe that in the conditions we exist in any man can have the perfect health that all wild creatures enjoy.



## X

AFTER my long talk with the bird-catcher on the 24th June, and two more talks equally long on the two following days, I found that something of the charm the common had had for me was gone. It was not quite the same as formerly; even the sunshine had a something of conscious sadness in it which was like a shadow. Those merry little brown twitterers that frequently shot across the sky, looking small as insects in the wide blue expanse, and ever and anon dropped swiftly down like showers of aerolites, to lose themselves in the grass and herbage, or perch singing on the topmost dead twigs of a bush, now existed in constant imminent danger—not of that quick merciful destruction which nature has for her weaklings, and for all that fail to reach her high standard; but of a worse fate, the prison life which is not nature's ordinance, but one of the cunning larger Ape's abhorred inventions. Instead of taking my usual long strolls about the common I loitered once more in the village lanes and had my reward.

On the morning of the 27th June I was out sauntering very indolently, thinking of nothing at all; for it was a surpassingly brilliant day, and the sunshine produced the effect of a warm, lucent, buoyant fluid, in which I seemed to float rather than walk—a celestial water, which, like the more ponderable and common sort, may sometimes be both felt and seen. The sensation of feeling it is somewhat similar to that experienced by a bather standing breast-deep in a clear, green, warm tropical sea, so charged with salt that it lifts him up; but to distinguish it with the eye, you must look away to a distance of some yards in an open unshaded place, when it will become visible as fine glinting lines, quivering and serpentine upwards, fountain-wise, from the surface. All at once I was startled by hearing the loud importunate hunger-call of a young cuckoo quite close to me. Moving softly up to the low hedge and peering over, I saw the bird perched on a long cross-stick, which had been put up in a cottage garden to hang clothes on: he was not more than three to four yards from me, a fine young cuckoo in perfect plumage, his barred under-surface facing me. Although seeing me as plainly as I saw him, he exhibited no fear, and did not stir. Why should he, since I had

not come there to feed him, and, to his inexperienced avian mind, was only one of the huge terrestrial creatures of various forms, with horns and manes on their heads, that move heavily about in roads and pastures, and are nothing to birds? But his foster-parent, a hedge-sparrow, was suspicious, and kept at some distance with food in her bill; then, excited by his imperative note, she flitted shyly to him, and deposited a minute caterpillar in his great gaping yellow mouth. It was like dropping a bun into the monstrous mouth of the hippopotamus of the Zoological Gardens. But the hedge-sparrow was off and back again with a second morsel in a very few moments; and again and again she darted away in quest of food and returned successful, while the lazy beautiful giant sat sunning himself on his cross-stick and hungrily cried for more.

This is one of those exceptional sights in nature which, however often seen, never become altogether familiar, never fail to re-excite the old feelings of wonder and admiration which were experienced on first witnessing them. I can safely say, I think, that no man has observed so many parasitical young birds (individuals) being fed by their foster-parents as myself, yet the interest such a sight inspires in me is just as fresh now



as in boyhood. And probably in no parasitical species does the strangeness of the spectacle strike the mind so sharply as in this British bird, since the differences in size and colouring between the foster-parent and its false offspring are so much greater in its case. Here nature's unnaturalness in such an instinct—a close union of the beautiful and the monstrous—is seen in its extreme form. The hawk-like figure and markings of the cuckoo serve only to accentuate the disparity, which is perhaps greatest when the parent is the hedge-sparrow—so plainly-coloured a bird, so shy and secretive in its habits. One never ceases to be amazed at the blindness of the parental instinct in so intelligent a creature as a bird in a case of this kind. Some idea of how blind it is may be formed by imagining a case in widely separated types of our own species, which would be a parallel to that of the cuckoo and the hedge-sparrow. Let us imagine that some malicious Arabian Nights' genius had snatched up the infant male child of a Scandinavian couple—the largest of their nation; and flying away to Africa with it, to the heart of the great Aruwimi forest, had laid it on the breast of a little coffee-coloured, woolly-headed, spindle-shanked, pot-bellied pigmy mother, taking

away at the same time her own newly born babe; that she had tenderly nursed the substituted child, and reared and protected it, ministering, according to her lights, to all its huge wants, until he had come to the fullness of his stature, yet never suspected that the magnificent ivory-limbed giant, with flowing yellow locks and cerulean eyes, was not the child of her own womb.



## XI

BRIGHT and genial were all the last days of June, when I loitered in the lanes before the unwished day of my return to London. During this quiet, pleasant time the greenfinch was perhaps more to me than any other songster. In the village itself, with the adjacent lanes and orchards, this pretty, seldom-silent bird was the most common species. The village was his metropolis, just as London is ours—and the sparrow's; its lanes were his streets, its hedges and elm trees his cottage rows and tall stately mansions and public buildings. We frequently find the predominance of one species somewhat wearisome. Speaking for myself, there are songsters that are best appreciated when they are limited in numbers and keep their distance, but of the familiar, unambitious strains of swallow, robin, and wren I never tire, nor, during these days, could I have too much of the greenfinch, low as he ranks among British melodists. Tastes differ; that is a point on which we are all agreed, and every

one of us, even the humblest, is permitted to have his own preferences. Still, after re-reading Wordsworth's lines to *The Green Linnet*, it is curious, to say the least of it, to turn to some prose writer—an authority on birds, perhaps—to find that this species, whose music so charmed the poet, has for its song a monotonous croak, which it repeats at short intervals for hours without the slightest variation—a dismal sound which harmonises with no other sound in nature, and suggests nothing but heat and weariness, and is of all natural sounds the most irritating. To this writer, then—and there are others to keep him in countenance—the greenfinch as a vocalist ranks lower than the lowest. One can only wonder (and smile) at such extreme divergences. To my mind all natural sounds have in some measure an exhilarating effect, and I cannot get rid of the notion that so it should be with every one of us; and when some particular sound, or series of sounds, that has more than this common character, and is distinctly pleasing, is spoken of as nothing but disagreeable, irritating, and the rest of it, I am inclined to think that there is something wrong with the person who thus describes it; that he is not exactly as nature would have had him, but that either

during his independent life, or before it at some period of his prenatal existence, something must have happened to distune him. All this, I freely confess, may be nothing but fancy. In any case, the subject need not keep us longer from the greenfinch—that is to say, *my* greenfinch, not another man's.

From morning until evening all around and about the cottage, and out of doors whithersoever I bent my steps, from the masses of deep green foliage, sounded the perpetual airy prattle of these delightful birds. One had the idea that the concealed vocalists were continually meeting each other at little social gatherings, where they exchanged pretty loving greetings, and indulged in a leafy gossip, interspersed with occasional fragments of music, vocal and instrumental; now a long trill—a trilling, a tinkling, a sweeping of one minute finger-tip over metal strings as fine as gossamer threads—describe it how you will, you cannot describe it; then the long, low, inflected scream, like a lark's throat-note drawn out and inflected; little chirps and chirruping exclamations and remarks, and a soft warbled note three or four or more times repeated, and, sometimes, the singer fluttering up out of the foliage and hovering in the air, displaying his

green and yellow plumage while emitting these lovely notes; and again the trill, trill answering trill in different keys; and again the musical scream, as if some unsubstantial being, fairy or wood nymph, had screamed somewhere in her green hiding-place.

In London one frequently hears, especially in the spring, half-a-dozen sparrows just met together in a garden tree, or among the ivy or creeper on a wall, burst out suddenly into a confused rapturous chorus of chirruping sounds, mingled with others of a finer quality, liquid and ringing. At such times one is vexed to think that there are writers on birds who invariably speak of the sparrow as a tuneless creature, a harsh chirper, and nothing more. It strikes one that such writers either wilfully abuse or are ignorant of the right meaning of words, so wild and glad in character are these concerts of town sparrows, and so refreshing to the tired and noise-vexed brain! But now when I listened to the greenfinches in the village elms and hedges, if by chance a few sparrows burst out in loud gratulatory notes, the sounds they emitted appeared coarse, and I wished the chirrupers away. But with the true and brilliant songsters it seemed to me that the rippling greenfinch

music was always in harmony, forming as it were a kind of airy, subdued accompaniment to their loud and ringing tones.

I had had my nightingale days, my cuckoo and blackbird and tree-pipit days, with others too numerous to mention, and now I was having my greenfinch days; and these were the last.

One morning in July I was in my sitting-room, when in the hedge on the other side of the lane, just opposite my window, a small brown bird warbled a few rich notes, the prelude to his song. I went and stood by the open window, intently listening, when he sang again, but only a phrase or two. But I listened still, confidently expecting more; for although it was now long past his singing season, that splendid sunshine would compel him to express his gladness. Then, just when a fresh burst of music came, it was disturbed by another sound close by—a human voice, also singing. On the other side of the hedge in which the bird sat concealed was a cottage garden, and there, on a swing fastened to a pair of apple trees, a girl about eleven years old sat lazily swinging herself. Once or twice after she began singing the nightingale broke out again, and then at last he became

silent altogether, his voice overpowered by hers. Girl and bird were not five yards apart.

It greatly surprised me to hear her singing, for it was eleven o'clock, when all the village children were away at the National School, a time of day when, so far as human sounds were concerned, there reigned an almost unbroken silence. But very soon I recalled the fact that this was a very lazy child, and concluded that she had coaxed her mother into sending an excuse for keeping her at home, and so had kept her liberty on this beautiful morning. About two minutes' walk from the cottage, at the side of the crooked road running through the village, there was a group of ancient pollarded elm trees with huge, hollow trunks, and behind them an open space, a pleasant green slope, where some of the village children used to go every day to play on the grass. Here I used to see this girl lying in the sun, her dark chestnut hair loosed and scattered on the sward, her arms stretched out, her eyes nearly closed, basking in the sun, as happy as some heat-loving wild animal. No, it was not strange that she had not gone to school with the others when her disposition was remembered, but most strange to hear a voice of such quality in a spot where nature was rich



and lovely, and only man was, if not vile, at all events singularly wanting in the finer human qualities.

Looking out from the open window across the low hedge-top, I could see her as she alternately rose and fell with slow, indolent motion, now waist-high above the green dividing wall, then only her brown head visible resting against the rope just where her hand had grasped it. And as she swayed herself to and fro she sang that simple melody—probably some child's hymn which she had been taught at the Sunday-school; but it was a very long hymn, or else she repeated the same few stanzas many times, and after each there was a brief pause, and then the voice that seemed to fall and rise with the motion went on as before. I could have stood there for an hour—nay, for hours—listening to it, so fresh and so pure was the clear young voice, which had no earthly trouble in it, and no passion, and was in this like the melody of the birds of which I had lately heard so much; and with it all that tenderness and depth which is not theirs, but is human only and of the soul.

It struck me as a singular coincidence—and to a mind of so primitive a type as the writer's there is more in the fact than the word implies

—that, just as I had quitted London, to seek for just such a spot as I so speedily found, with the passionately exclaimed words of a young London girl ringing in my ears, so now I went back with this village girl's melody sounding and following me no less clearly and insistently. For it was not merely remembered, as we remember most things, but vividly and often reproduced, together with the various melodies of the birds I had listened to; a greater and principal voice in that choir, yet in no wise lessening their first value, nor ever out of harmony with them.



## QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS



## QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

1. Make a list of the birds on the pond in St. James's Park. If you live in London it will be an easy matter to go and see them. Take this book in your pocket. The pictures, by the side of the pond, will help you to pick out the various birds.

2. Make a sketch of a badger. Do you know of a proverb or saying in which the animal is mentioned?

3. Sketch the nightingale and its surroundings as described on p. 17.

4. Make a careful sketch of a nightingale and a robin, side by side.

5. Make a simple colour sketch of (i) the green woodpecker, (ii) the jay in an angry mood.

6. Why is it particularly cruel to cage a skylark?

7. Tell the story of Melford's jay in your own words.

8. Sketch a rook and a crow, side by side.

9. Make a colour sketch of a kingfisher.

10. Sketch a pollard-willow by a stream; and a water-lily in bloom.

11. Here is Wordsworth's poem *To a Butterfly*:

Stay near me—do not take thy flight!  
A little longer stay in sight!  
Much converse do I find in thee,  
Historian of my infancy!

Float near me, do not yet depart!  
 Dead times revive in thee:  
 Thou bring'st, gay creature as thou art,  
 A solemn image to my heart,  
 My father's family!

Oh! pleasant, pleasant were the days,  
 The time when, in our childish plays,  
 My sister Emmeline and I  
 Together chased the butterfly!  
 A very hunter did I rush  
 Upon the prey:—with leaps and springs  
 I followed on from brake to bush;  
 But she, God love her, feared to brush  
 The dust from off its wings.

Use this poem, for purposes of comparison, in browsing over pp. 45-48.

12. Read aloud, several times over, the passage about Melendez which begins "one whose finest songs . . . but a flower."

13. There is a beautiful picture in the paragraph beginning "Nearly midway between" and ending with "sing and sing" (pp. 46-47). Sketch a tree-pipit.

14. Study pp. 47-49 as an example of the true holiday mood.

15. Does the author lead us to think that *all* tree-pipits sing like his favourite? What is *your* explanation of the fact that after two or three days "the secret charm had vanished"?

16. Look up willow-wren, wood-wren, coal-tit, wry-neck and chiffchaff in bird books or encyclopædias, and make a sketch of each.

17. Read aloud and learn the passage "It was an enchanting experience . . . one prolonged trill."

18. One of the first steps in bird-listening is to pick out the louder singers. Which three birds did the author find to be predominant?

19. The human laugh is worth studying. Note the author's remark, "not the laugh I should like to hear from any person I take an interest in."

20. Pages 57-62 show how the old legends of antiquity arose. The author shows in his own recorded thoughts each stage in the growth of a Nature myth, and his story might well be studied from this point of view.

21. Can you name anything "on the gamekeeper's black list"?

22. How does the author suggest that the extinction of birds might be prevented?

23. Study the fascinating description of the old man on pp. 67-68 and especially the effect of the sunshine upon his system. What is a rough-cast face?

24. Was the villager's treatment of the wryneck so very bad, after all?

25. Note the sentence "No person is, or ever can be, a good observer of the things in which he is not specially interested."

26. Have you any parallel from your own experience to the blue-tits building in such an easily accessible place as in the old apple-tree leaning towards the lane? (N.B. The writer of these notes set up a bundle of pea-sticks against an exposed wooden fence, and a pair of thrushes built a nest in the top of the bundle, scarcely four feet from the ground.)

27. What is your opinion about the story of Ancient Greece?

28. In connection with the excellent description of the birds and the fruit trees, read Tennyson's poem *The Blackbird*.

29. Have you any suggestions to add to those of p. 82?

30. In Section VII. note the picture of the yellow-bunting on the gorse bush. Can you think of the reason why he chose this kind of bush as a perch?

31. Find a phrase on p. 86 which explains why many people cannot distinguish the note of one bird from that of another.

32. Note how the observer is continually trying to compare bird songs with other sounds. Find two comparisons or similes of this kind in the first part of Section VII.

33. Look up *cicada* and *batrachian* in the dictionary.

34. Have you any stories of mimicry to match those of pp. 89 and following?

35. What might be inferred from the paragraph dealing with the song of the thrush?

36. The poem of Richard Crashaw entitled *Music's Duel* is printed on pp. 162-67 of this book. Famiano Strada (1572-1649) was a Jesuit priest and professor of rhetoric in the Gregorian College in Rome. He wrote in Latin, and his chief work was a history of the revolt of the Netherlands against Charles V. of Spain. The translation of Crashaw is really a fresh poem, for he ennobles and transfigures the theme of



Strada. Crashaw was contemporary with Strada and was also a priest. He was a Fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge, and was turned out of the College by the Parliamentarians, went to France and joined the Roman Catholic Church. At a later date he lived in Rome.

37. If you hear the note of the blackbird without seeing the bird, can you be absolutely certain that it comes from the blackbird?

38. Which birds sing all the year round?

39. Quote an instance of the bird's instinct for protecting its young from the first part of Section VIII.

40. Do you know of another bird which appears to feign injury in order to protect its nest?

41. Investigate *gallinaceous* and *passerine* in the dictionary.

42. When is the anxiety of the parent bird at its greatest?

43. The paragraph beginning "It would be a great mistake" (p. 107) is worthy of special study and remembrance.

44. Can you deduce from the paragraph immediately following the above the difference between instinct and intelligence?

45. Study carefully the paragraph (Section VIII.) about migration, and the very beautiful story of the hen pheasant at the end of this section. Is intuition superior or inferior to intelligence? (The answer to this last question is found in the last three words of Section VIII.)

46. Investigate the meaning of *fringilline*.

47. Discuss the author's method of dealing with his "enemy on the common."

48. There are arguments on bird-catching in Section IX. which would be useful for a school debate on this subject.

49. Study the passage "The river here . . . by others and yet others " on p. 123 as a word picture of great beauty.

50. There is another good subject for debate in the sentence " If laws do not express or square with public will or opinion they have little force." Arguments are given in Section IX.

51. Read Shelley's, James Hogg's and Wordsworth's poems to the skylark (pp. 167-72).

52. Do you think the Maidenhead guide-book writer serious or satirical?

53. In pleading for protection for the skylark, are we thinking of the bird or of ourselves?

54. Note carefully the passage about disease in birds (p. 135), and the beautiful ideas about death which immediately follow; and compare in this connection R. L. Stevenson's passage about the old Greek saying " Whom the gods love die young ":

Every heart that has beat strong and cheerfully has left a hopeful impulse behind it in the world, and bettered the tradition of mankind. And even if death catch people, like an open pitfall, and in mid-career, laying out vast projects, and planning monstrous foundations, flushed with hope, and their mouths full of boastful language, they should be at once tripped up and silenced: is there not something brave and spirited in such a termination? and does not life go down with a better grace, foaming in full body over a preci-

pice, than miserably straggling to an end in sandy deltas? When the Greeks made their fine saying that those whom the gods love die young, I cannot help believing they had this sort of death also in their eye. For surely, at whatever age it overtake the man, this is to die young. Death has not been suffered to take so much as an illusion from his heart. In the hot-fit of life, a-tiptoe on the highest point of being, he passes at a bound on to the other side. The noise of the mallet and chisel is scarcely quenched, the trumpets are hardly done blowing, when, trailing with him clouds of glory, this happy-starred, full-blooded spirit shoots into the spiritual land.

55. Find a definition of prison life in the first part of Section X.

56. Read Wordsworth's *The Green Linnet* (p. 173).

57. Study the beautiful picture on p. 151, and compare it with the first incident in the book.

58. Which of the three poems about the skylark, by Shelley, Wordsworth and Blake, in the following pages, gives you the best idea of the bird itself? Give your reasons.

59. Read the splendid passage from Izaak Walton's *Compleat Angler* (p. 178 ff.) for the sake of comparison with Hudson's style.



## THE COMPLEAT ANGLER

[THE following passage about birds, from the *Compleat Angler*, is written in Izaak Walton's very finest prose. It should be read for comparison with Hudson's style.]

AUCEPS. Your motion is consented to with all my heart; and to testify it, I will begin as you have desired me.

And first, for the Element that I use to trade in, which is the Air, an element of more worth than weight, an element that doubtless exceeds both the Earth and Water; for though I sometimes deal in both, yet the air is most properly mine, I and my Hawks use that most, and it yields us most recreation. It stops not the high soaring of my noble, generous Falcon; in it she ascends to such a height, as the dull eyes of beasts and fish are not able to reach to; their bodies are too gross for such high elevations; in the Air my troops of Hawks soar up on high, and when they are lost in the sight of men, then they attend upon and converse with the Gods; therefore I think my Eagle is so justly styled Jove's servant in ordinary: and that very Falcon, that I am now going to see, deserves no meaner a title, for she usually in her flight endangers herself, like the son of Dædalus, to have her wings scorched by the sun's heat, she flies so near it, but her mettle makes her careless of danger; for she then heeds nothing, but makes her nimble pinions cut the fluid air, and so makes her high-way over the steepest mountains and deepest rivers, and in her glorious career looks with contempt upon those high steeples and magnificent palaces which we adore and wonder at; from which height, I can make her to

descend by a word from my mouth, which she both knows and obeys, to accept of meat from my hand, to own me for her Master, to go home with me, and be willing the next day to afford me the like recreation.

And more; this element of air which I profess to trade in, the worth of it is such, and it is of such necessity, that no creature whatsoever—not only those numerous creatures that feed on the face of the earth, but those various creatures that have their dwelling within the waters, every creature that hath life in its nostrils, stands in need of my element. The waters cannot preserve the Fish without air, witness the not breaking of ice in an extreme frost; the reason is, for that if the inspiring and expiring organ of any animal be stopped, it suddenly yields to nature, and dies. Thus necessary is air, to the existence both of Fish and Beasts, nay, even to Man himself; that air, or breath of life, with which God at first inspired mankind, he, if he wants it, dies presently, becomes a sad object to all that loved and beheld him, and in an instant turns to putrefaction.

Nay more; the very birds of the air, those that be not Hawks, are both so many and so useful and pleasant to mankind, that I must not let them pass without some observations. They both feed and refresh him; feed him with their choice bodies, and refresh him with their heavenly voices:—I will not undertake to mention the several kinds of Fowl by which this is done: and his curious palate pleased by day, and which with their very excrements afford him a soft lodging at night:—These I will pass by, but not those little nimble musicians of the air, that warble forth their curious ditties, with which nature hath furnished them to the shame of art.

As first the Lark, when she means to rejoice, to cheer

herself and those that hear her; she then quits the earth, and sings as she ascends higher into the air, and having ended her heavenly employment, grows then mute, and sad, to think she must descend to the dull earth, which she would not touch, but for necessity.

How do the Blackbird and Thrassel with their melodious voices bid welcome to the cheerful Spring, and in their fixed months warble forth such ditties as no art or instrument can reach to!

Nay, the smaller birds also do the like in their particular seasons, as namely the Laverock, the Tit-lark, the little Linnet, and the honest Robin that loves mankind both alive and dead.

But the Nightingale, another of my airy creatures, breathes such sweet loud musick out of her little instrumental throat, that it might make mankind to think miracles are not ceased. He that at midnight, when the very labourer sleeps securely, should hear, as I have very often, the clear airs, the sweet descants, the natural rising and falling, the doubling and redoubling of her voice, might well be lifted above earth, and say, "Lord, what musick hast thou provided for the Saints in Heaven, when thou affordest bad men such musick on Earth!"

And this makes me the less to wonder at the many Aviaries in Italy, or at the great charge of Varro's Aviary, the ruins of which are yet to be seen in Rome, and is still so famous there, that it is reckoned for one of those notables which men of foreign nations either record, or lay up in their memories when they return from travel.

This for the birds of pleasure, of which very much more might be said. My next shall be of birds of political

use. I think it is not to be doubted that Swallows have been taught to carry letters between two armies; but 'tis certain that when the Turks besieged Malta or Rhodes, I now remember not which it was, Pigeons are then related to carry and recarry letters: and Mr. G. Sandys, in his *Travels*, relates it to be done betwixt Aleppo and Babylon. But if that be disbelieved, it is not to be doubted that the Dove was sent out of the ark by Noah, to give him notice of land, when to him all appeared to be sea; and the Dove proved a faithful and comfortable messenger. And for the sacrifices of the law, a pair of Turtle-doves, or young Pigeons, were as well accepted as costly Bulls and Rams; and when God would feed the Prophet Elijah, after a kind of miraculous manner, he did it by Ravens, who brought him meat morning and evening. Lastly, the Holy Ghost, when he descended visibly upon our Saviour, did it by assuming the shape of a Dove. And, to conclude this part of my discourse, pray remember these wonders were done by birds of the air, the element in which they, and I, take so much pleasure.

There is also a little contemptible winged creature, an inhabitant of my aerial element, namely the laborious Bee, of whose prudence, policy, and regular government of their own commonwealth, I might say much, as also of their several kinds, and how useful their honey and wax are both for meat and medicines to mankind; but I will leave them to their sweet labour, without the least disturbance, believing them to be all very busy at this very time amongst the herbs and flowers that we see nature puts forth this May morning.

And now to return to my Hawks, from whom I have made too long a digression. You are to note, that they



are usually distinguished into two kinds; namely, the long-winged, and the short-winged Hawk: of the first kind, there be chiefly in use amongst us in this nation,

The Gerfalcon and Jerkin,  
The Falcon and Tassel-gentle,  
The Laner and Laneret,  
The Bockerel and Bockeret,  
The Saker and Sacaret,  
The Merlin and Jack Merlin,  
The Hobby and Jack:

There is the Stelletto of Spain,  
The Blood-red Rook from Turkey,  
The Waskite from Virginia:

And there is of short-winged Hawks,  
The Eagle and Iron,  
The Goshawk and Tarcel,  
The Sparhawk and Musket,  
The French Pye of two sorts:

These are reckoned Hawks of note and worth; but we have also of an inferior rank,

The Stanyel, the Ringtail,  
The Raven, the Buzzard,  
The Forked Kite, the Bald Buzzard,  
The Hen-driver, and others that I forbear to name.

Gentlemen, if I should enlarge my discourse to the observation of the Eires, the Brancher, the Ramish Hawk, the Haggard, and the two sorts of Lentners, and then treat of their several Ayries, their Mewings, rare order of casting, and the renovation of their feathers: their reclaiming, dieting, and then come to their rare stories of practice; I say, if I should enter into these, and many other observations that I could make, it would be

much, very much pleasure to me: but lest I should break the rules of civility with you, by taking up more than the proportion of time allotted to me, I will here break off, and entreat you, Mr. Venator, to say what you are able in the commendation of Hunting, to which you are so much affected; and if time will serve, I will beg your favour for a further enlargement of some of those several heads of which I have spoken. But no more at présent.

POEMS OF BIRDS





## POEMS OF BIRDS

### MUSIC'S DUEL

Now Westward Sol had spent the richest beams  
Of Noon's high glory, when hard by the streams  
Of Tiber, on the scene of a green plat,  
Under protection of an oak, there sate  
A sweet Lute's-master; in whose gentle airs  
He lost the day's heat, and his own hot cares.

Close in the covert of the leaves there stood  
A nightingale, come from the neighbouring wood:  
(The sweet inhabitant of each glad tree,  
Their Muse, their Syren—harmless Syren she!)  
There stood she list'ning, and did entertain  
The music's soft report, and mould the same  
In her own murmurs, that whatever mood  
His curious fingers lent, her voice made good:  
The man perceiv'd his rival, and her art;  
Dispos'd to give the light-foot lady sport,  
Awakes his lute, and 'gainst the fight to come  
Informs it in a sweet prelude  
Of closer strains, and ere the war begin,  
He lightly skirmishes on every string,  
Charg'd with a flying touch: and straightway she  
Carves out her dainty voice as readily,  
Into a thousand sweet distinguish'd tones,  
And reckons up in soft divisions,  
Quick volumes of wild notes; to let him know  
By that shrill taste, she could do something too.

His nimble hands' instinct then taught each string  
A cap'ring cheerfulness; and made them sing  
To their own dance; now negligently rash  
He throws his arm, and with a long-drawn dash  
Blends all together; then distinctly trips  
From this to that; then quick returning skips  
And snatches this again, and pauses there.  
She measures every measure, everywhere  
Meets art with art; sometimes as if in doubt  
Not perfect yet, and fearing to be out,  
Trails her plain ditty in one long-spun note,  
Through the sleek passage of her open throat,  
A clear unwrinkled song; then doth she point it  
With tender accents, and severely joint it  
By short diminutives, that being rear'd  
In controverting warbles evenly shar'd,  
With her sweet self she wrangles. He amaz'd  
That from so small a channel should be rais'd  
The torrent of a voice, whose melody  
Could melt into such sweet variety,  
Strains higher yet; that tickled with rare art  
The tatling strings (each breathing in his part)  
Most kindly do fall out; the grumbling base  
In surly groans disdains the treble's grace;  
The high-perch't treble chirps at this, and chides,  
Until his finger (Moderator) hides  
And closes the sweet quarrel, rousing all,  
Hoarse, shrill at once; as when the trumpets call  
Hot Mars to th' harvest of Death's field, and woo  
Men's hearts into their hands; this lesson too  
She gives him back; her supple breast thrills out  
Sharp airs, and staggers in a warbling doubt  
Of dallying sweetness, hovers o'er her skill,

And folds in wav'd notes with a trembling bill  
The pliant series of her slippery song;  
Then starts she suddenly into a throng  
Of short, thick sobs, whose thund'ring volleys float  
And roll themselves over her lubric throat  
In panting murmurs, 'still'd out of her breast,  
That ever-bubbling spring; the sugared nest  
Of her delicious soul, that there does lie  
Bathing in streams of liquid melody;  
Music's best seed-plot, whence in ripen'd airs  
A golden-headed harvest fairly rears  
His honey-dropping tops, ploughed by her breath,  
Which there reciprocally laboureth  
In that sweet soil; it seems a holy choir  
Founded to th' name of great Apollo's lyre,  
Whose silver-roof rings with the sprightly notes  
Of sweet-lipp'd angel-imps, that swill their throats  
In cream of morning Helicon, and then  
Preferre soft-anthems to the ears of men,  
To woo them from their beds, still murmuring  
That men can sleep while they their matins sing:  
(Most divine service) whose so early lay,  
Prevents the eye-lids of the blushing Day!  
There you might hear her kindle her soft voice,  
In the close murmur of a sparkling noise,  
And lay the ground-work of her hopeful song,  
Still keeping in the forward stream, so long,  
Till a sweet whirl-wind (striving to get out)  
Heaves her soft bosom, wanders round about,  
And makes a pretty earthquake in her breast,  
Till the fledg'd notes at length forsake their nest,  
Fluttering wanton shoals, and to the sky  
Wing'd with their own wild echoes, prattling fly.

She opes the floodgate, and lets loose a tide  
Of streaming sweetness, which in state doth ride  
On the wav'd back of every swelling strain,  
Rising and falling in a pompous train.  
And while she thus discharges a shrill peal  
Of flashing airs; she qualifies their zeal  
With the cool epode of a graver note,  
Thus high, thus low, as if her silver throat  
Would reach the brazen voice of War's hoarse bird  
Her little soul is ravish'd: and so pour'd  
Into loose ecstasies, that she is plac'd  
Above herself, Music's Enthusiast.

Shame now and anger mix'd a double stain  
In the Musician's face; " yet once again  
(Mistress) I come; now reach a strain my lute  
Above her mock, or be for ever mute;  
Or tune a song of victory to me,  
Or to thyself, sing thine own obsequie "  
So said, his hands, sprightly as fire, he flings  
And with a quivering coyness tastes the strings.  
The sweet-lip'd sisters, musically frightened,  
Singing their fears, are fearfully delighted,  
Trembling as when Apollo's golden hairs  
Are fann'd and frizzled, in the wanton airs  
Of his own breath: which married to his lyre  
Doth tune the spheres, and make Heaven's self look  
higher.

From this to that, from that to this he flies,  
Feels Music's pulse in all her arteries;  
Caught in a net which there Apollo spreads,  
His fingers struggle with the vocal threads.  
Following those little rills, he sinks into  
A sea of Helicon; his hand does go



Those paths of sweetness which with nectar drop,  
Softer than that which pants in Hebe's cup.  
The humourous strings expound his learned touch,  
By various glosses; now they seem to grutch,  
And murmur in a buzzing din, then jingle  
In shrill-tongue'd accents: striving to be single.  
Every smooth turn, every delicious stroke  
Gives life to some new grace; thus doth h' invoke  
Sweetness by all her names; thus, bravely thus  
(Fraught with a fury so harmonious)  
The lute's light genius now does proudly rise,  
Heav'd on the surges of swoll'n rapsodies,  
Whose flourish (meteor-like) doth curl the air  
With flash of high-born fancies: here and there  
Dancing in lofty measures, and anon  
Creeps on the soft touch of a tender tone;  
Whose trembling murmurs melting in wild airs  
Runs to and fro, complaining his sweet cares,  
Because those precious mysteries that dwell  
In Music's ravish'd soul, he dares not tell,  
But whisper to the world: thus do they vary  
Each string his note, as if they meant to carry  
Their Master's blest soul (snatch'd out at his ears  
By a strong ecstasy) through all the spheres  
Of Music's heaven; and seat it there on high  
In th' empyræan of pure harmony.  
At length (after so long, so loud a strife  
Of all the strings, still breathing the best life  
Of blest variety, attending on  
His fingers' fairest revolution  
In many a sweet rise, many as sweet a fall)  
A full-mouth'd diapason swallows all.

This done, he lists what she would say to this,

And she (although her breath's late exercise  
Had dealt too roughly with her tender throat),  
Yet summons all her sweet powers for a note.  
Alas! in vain! for while (sweet soul!) she tries  
To measure all those wild diversities  
Of chattering strings, by the small size of one  
Poor simple voice, rais'd in a natural tone;  
She fails, and failing grieves, and grieving dies.  
She dies: and leaves her life the Victor's prize  
Falling upon his lute: O, fit to have  
(That liv'd so sweetly) dead, so sweet a grave!

RICHARD CRASHAW.

### TO A SKYLARK

HAIL to thee, blithe spirit!  
Bird thou never wert—  
That from heaven or near it  
Pourest thy full heart  
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.

Higher still and higher  
From the earth thou springest,  
Like a cloud of fire;  
The blue deep thou wingest,  
And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest.

In the golden light'ning  
Of the sunken sun,  
O'er which clouds are bright'ning,  
Thou dost float and run,  
Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun.

The pale purple even  
    Melts around thy flight;  
Like a star of heaven,  
    In the broad daylight  
Thou art unseen, but yet I hear thy shrill delight—

Keen as are the arrows  
    Of that silver sphere  
Whose intense lamp narrows  
    In the white dawn clear,  
Until we hardly see, we feel that it is there.

All the earth and air  
    With thy voice is loud,  
As, when night is bare,  
    From one lonely cloud  
The moon rains out her beams, and heaven is overflow'd.

What thou art we know not;  
    What is most like thee?  
From rainbow clouds there flow not  
    Drops so bright to see,  
As from thy presence showers a rain of melody:—

Like a poet hidden  
    In the light of thought,  
Singing hymns unbidden,  
    Till the world is wrought  
To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not:

Like a high-born maiden  
    In a palace tower,  
Soothing her love-laden  
    Soul in secret hour  
With music sweet as love, which overflows her bower;

Like a glow-worm golden  
In a dell of dew,  
Scattering unbeholden  
Its aerial hue  
Among the flowers and grass which screen it from the  
view;

Like a rose embower'd  
In its own green leaves,  
By warm winds deflower'd  
Till the scent it gives  
Makes faint with too much sweet these heavy-winged  
thieves;

Sound of vernal showers  
On the twinkling grass,  
Rain-awaken'd flowers—  
All that ever was  
Joyous and clear and fresh—thy music doth surpass.

Teach us, sprite or bird,  
What sweet thoughts are thine;  
I have never heard  
Praise of love or wine  
That panted forth a flood of rapture so divine.

Chorus hymeneal,  
Or triumphal chant,  
Match'd with thine would be all  
But an empty vaunt—  
A thing wherein we feel there is some hidden want.

What objects are the fountains  
Of thy happy strain?  
What fields, or waves, or mountains?  
What shapes of sky or plain?  
What love of thine own kind? what ignorance of pain?

With thy clear keen joyance  
Languor cannot be:  
Shadow of annoyance  
Never came near thee;  
Thou lovest, but ne'er knew love's sad satiety.

Waking or asleep,  
Thou of death must deem  
Things more true and deep  
Than we mortals dream,  
Or how could thy notes flow in such a crystal stream?

We look before and after,  
And pine for what is not:  
Our sincerest laughter  
With some pain is fraught;  
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

Yet, if we could scorn  
Hate and pride and fear,  
If we were things born  
Not to shed a tear,  
I know not how thy joy we ever should come near.

Better than all measures  
Of delightful sound,  
Better than all treasures  
That in books are found,  
Thy skill to poet were, thou scorner of the ground!

Teach me half the gladness  
That thy brain must know;  
Such harmonious madness  
From my lips would flow,  
The world should listen then, as I am listening now.

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY.

### BIRD OF THE WILDERNESS

BIRD of the wilderness,  
Blithesome and cumberless,  
Sweet be thy matin o'er moorland and lea!  
Emblem of happiness,  
Blest is thy dwelling-place—  
O, to abide in the desert with thee!

Wild is thy lay and loud,  
Far in the downy cloud  
Love gives it energy, love gave it birth.  
Where, on thy dewy wing,  
Where art thou journeying?  
Thy lay is in heaven, thy love is on earth.

O'er fell and fountain sheen,  
O'er moor and mountain green,  
O'er the red streamer, that heralds the day,  
Over the cloudlet dim,  
Over the rainbow's rim,  
Musical cherub, soar, singing, away.

Then when the gloaming comes,  
Low in the heather blooms,

Sweet will thy welcome and bed of love be!  
Emblem of happiness,  
Blest is thy dwelling-place—  
O, to abide in the desert with thee!

JAMES HOGG.

## TO A SKYLARK

UP with me! up with me into the clouds!  
For thy song, Lark, is strong;  
Up with me, up with me into the clouds!  
Singing, singing,  
With clouds and sky above thee ringing,  
Lift me, guide me till I find  
That spot which seems so to thy mind!

I have walked through wildernesses dreary  
And to-day my heart is weary;  
Had I now the wings of a Faëry,  
Up to thee would I fly.  
There is madness about thee, and joy divine  
In that song of thine;  
Lift me, guide me high and high  
To thy banqueting-place in the sky.

Joyous as morning  
Thou art laughing and scorning;  
Thou hast a nest for thy love and thy rest,  
And, though little troubled with sloth,  
Drunken Lark! thou would'st be loth  
To be such a traveller as I.

Happy, happy Liver,  
With a soul as strong as a mountain river  
Pouring out praise to the Almighty Giver,  
Joy and jollity be with us both!

Alas! my journey, rugged and uneven,  
Through prickly moors or dusty ways must wind,  
But hearing thee, or others of thy kind,  
As full of gladness and as free of heaven,  
I, with my fate contented, will plod on,  
And hope for higher raptures, when life's day is  
done.

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH.

### THE GREEN LINNET

BENEATH these fruit-tree boughs that shed  
Their snow-white blossoms on my head,  
With brightest sunshine round me spread  
Of spring's unclouded weather,  
In this sequestered nook how sweet  
To sit upon my orchard-seat!  
And birds and flowers once more to greet,  
My last year's friends together.

Once have I marked, the happiest guest  
In all this covert of the blest:  
Hail to Thee, far above the rest  
In joy of voice and pinion!  
Thou, Linnet! in thy green array,  
Presiding Spirit here to-day,  
Dost lead the revels of the May;  
And this is thy dominion.



While birds, and butterflies, and flowers,  
Make all one band of paramours,  
Thou, ranging up and down the bowers,  
Art sole in thy employment:  
A Life, a Presence like the Air,  
Scattering thy gladness without care,  
Too blest with any one to pair;  
Thyself thy own enjoyment.

Amid yon tuft of hazel trees,  
That twinkle to the gusty breeze,  
Behold him perched in ecstasies,  
Yet seeming still to hover;  
There! where the flutter of his wings  
Upon his back and body flings  
Shadows and sunny glimmerings,  
That cover him all over.

My dazzled sight he oft deceives,  
A Brother of the dancing leaves;  
Then flits, and from the cottage-eaves  
Pours forth his song in gushes;  
As if by that exulting strain  
He mocked and treated with disdain  
The voiceless Form he chose to feign,  
While fluttering in the bushes.

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH.

“O NIGHTINGALE! THOU SURELY ART”

O NIGHTINGALE! thou surely art  
A creature of a “fiery heart”;—  
These notes of thine—they pierce and pierce;  
Tumultuous harmony and fierce!

Thou sing'st as if the God of wine  
Had helped thee to a Valentine;  
A song in mockery and despite  
Of shades, and dews, and silent night;  
And steady bliss, and all the loves  
Now sleeping in these peaceful groves.

I heard a Stock-dove sing or say  
His homely tale, this very day;  
His voice was buried among trees,  
Yet to be come at by the breeze:  
He did not cease; but cooed—and cooed;  
And somewhat pensively he wooed:  
He sang of love, with quiet blending,  
Slow to begin, and never ending;  
Of serious faith, and inward glee;  
That was the song—the song for me!

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH.

### TO THE CUCKOO<sup>1</sup>

O BLITHE New-comer! I have heard,  
I hear thee and rejoice.  
O Cuckoo! shall I call thee Bird,  
Or but a wandering Voice?

While I am lying on the grass  
Thy twofold shout I hear,  
From hill to hill it seems to pass,  
At once far off, and near.

<sup>1</sup> Composed in the orchard, Town-end, Grasmere.

Though babbling only to the Vale,  
Of sunshine and of flowers,  
Thou bringest unto me a tale  
Of visionary hours.

Thrice welcome, darling of the Spring!  
Even yet thou art to me  
No bird, but an invisible thing,  
A voice, a mystery;

The same whom in my school-boy days  
I listened to; that Cry  
Which made me look a thousand ways  
In bush, and tree, and sky.

To seek thee did I often rove  
Through woods and on the green;  
And thou wert still a hope, a love;  
Still longed for, never seen.

And I can listen to thee yet;  
Can lie upon the plain  
And listen, till I do beget  
That golden time again.

O blessèd Bird! the earth we pace  
Again appears to be  
An unsubstantial, faery place;  
That is fit home for Thee.

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH.

## THE LARK

THE Lark sitting upon his earthy bed, just as the morn  
Appears, listens silent; then springing from the waving  
cornfield, loud

He leads the Choir of Day! trill, trill, trill, trill!

Mounting upon the wings of light into the Great Expanse,  
Re-echoing against the lovely blue and shining heavenly  
shell,

His little throat labours with inspiration; every feather  
On throat and breast and wings vibrates with the  
effluence divine.

All Nature listens silent to him, and the Awful Sun  
Stands still upon the Mountain, looking on this little bird  
With eyes of soft humility and wonder, love, and awe.

WILLIAM BLAKE.

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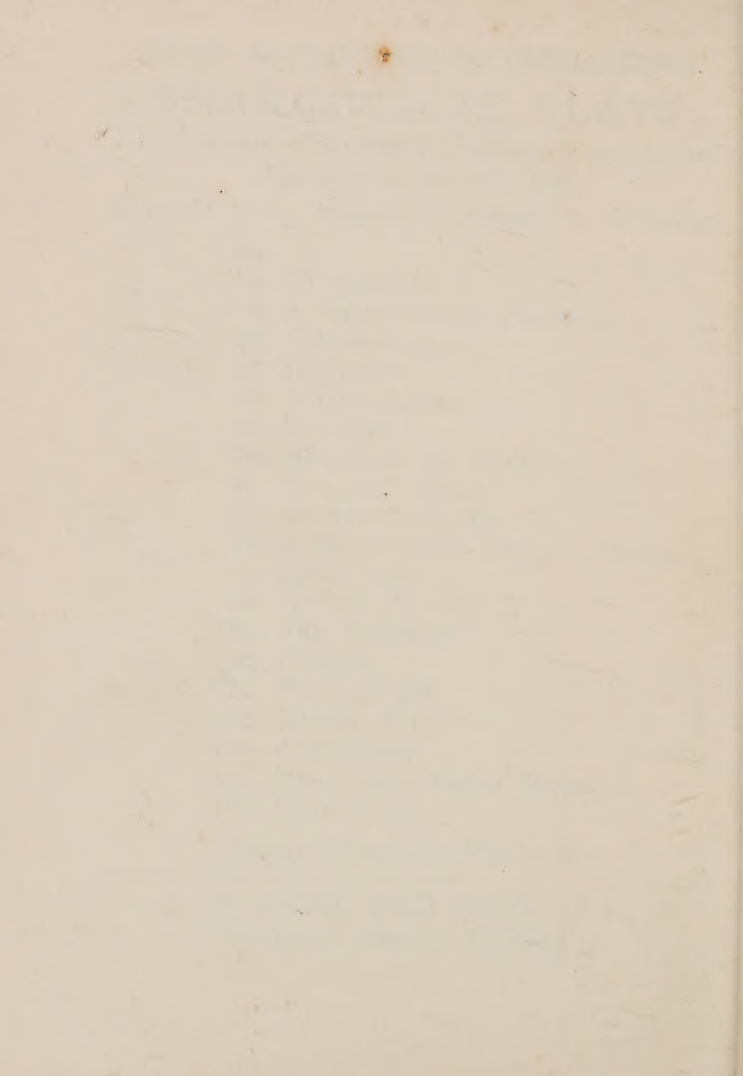
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